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# Hi-Fi Choice

**PASSION FOR SOUND**

Issue No. **380**

Yearbook 2013

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# 67

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Hi-Fi World, July 2013



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## BADGES EXPLAINED

### OUR AWARDS



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Comparative tests can only have one winner, and this badge says it all!



Welcome to the *Hi-Fi Choice* Yearbook 2013 – a special edition celebrating what has been a fantastic year in the world of audio, with all the latest and greatest hi-fi products that stand above their peers and offer a winning combination of outstanding sound quality and value for money.

This 164-page bumper issue is packed with five-star reviews and badge-winning products covering 14 essential audio categories to help you compile the ultimate auditioning list of must-own kit. It's a collection of the finest hardware we've seen over the past 12 months, all exhaustively reviewed by our dashing team of hi-fi experts below. Many products are winners of our respected *Group Test*, which further underlines their outstanding capabilities against the competition.

What's more, our eight-page *Music Reviews* section compiles the year's best album releases to get your toes tapping and show off your system, while the *Retro* pages revisit some of the yesteryear hi-fi we've covered and take us on a journey down memory lane to remind us of the vintage kit that got us hooked in the first place.

**Lee Dunkley** Editor

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## REVIEWERS



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**JASON KENNEDY**



**PATRICK CLEASBY**



**TIM JARMAN**



**NEVILLE ROBERTS**



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"The sound is big, bold and musical, but never harsh or uncouth."

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Jeff Dorgay, *Tone Audio Magazine*, January 2013



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Paul Rigby, *Hi Fi World*, March 2013



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Cheshire, SK8 2AA Tel: 0161 428 7887

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# ATC CDA2

**T**his is not merely a CD player, but also an analogue and digital preamplifier with an onboard DAC that can be used to convert signals from sources with an S/PDIF output. The eschewing of new-fangled technologies means that the CDA2 is devoid of a USB input, which is something that will apparently be put right in future versions. If you want to play from a computer there are plenty of good USB to S/PDIF converters around for reasonable prices.

The back panel sports two analogue inputs, a minijack and 'two' digital inputs split into Toslink or coaxial types, there is also a headphone output – seems like an odd place to put one, but at least it's available.

ATC doesn't specify a great deal about the CD player or digital section save that the latter has a Wolfson DAC that supports most of the sample rates up to 192kHz – 176.4kHz aside.

Construction is solid and not unattractive thanks to a half-inch thick aluminium front panel that's machined with black styling bars inlaid on either side. The volume control could be more ergonomic, however, its attractive domed shape leaving little but the indicator to get a grasp on.

Set up is very straight forward if you are familiar with preamps or DACs. Just connect the power amp or active speakers to the outputs and hook up any analogue or digital sources to the appropriate inputs. Although the spec states that it has two digital inputs, in fact it has two optical and two coaxial, which can be separately accessed, so in practice there are four.

## Sound quality

I kick off by using the CDA2 as a CD player and preamp and discover just why ATC has so many jazz and classical fans. Shostakovich's *Gadfly* (National Symphony Orchestra of Ukraine/Kuchar) reveals dynamics laid out in stark relief that prompt several semi expletives of surprise.

Getting back to more familiar material in the form of louche jazzier John Lurie's *Legendary Marvin Pontiac* makes it clear that the ATC can deliver real solidity in the bottom end and very strong presence from vocals. It also reveals a slight brashness from certain instruments, especially at higher frequencies. This is a very matter of fact, fat-free disc spinner and does nothing to smooth over the shortcomings of a recording. Put another way it's starkly revealing. There is little in the way of finessing going on as you might find with valve products and quite a few high-end transistor ones to boot. ATC's take is very much like that found in the studio, the ones where it makes acoustic recordings that is – let as much through as possible. This works like a dream when the recording is clean and preferably devoid of digital processing and the like, but can be a much less comfortable experience with music that has been produced to have a certain sound through less explicit equipment.

Timing-wise it's even handed, not as quick as the best, but by no means lazy, again it adds very little and all that you can hear by comparison with more transparent kit is a slight sense of the electronic.

As a DAC with a Naim UnitiServe providing the signal you immediately

hear the gravitas that the CDA2's unrestricted bottom end delivers alongside the unerringly warts and all midband. This sounds a bit hard edged with Samuel Yirga's Ethiopian jazz when instruments like the vibes come to the fore, but you always know plenty about the character of the instruments in the mix, which makes me think it's the recording not the converter that is the limitation. Beethoven's *Late String Quartets* (Alban Berg Quartett) on the other hand play right into its hands and sound totally real. Where there are no hard edges in the recording, just the rich tonality of instruments, the music comes to life and you can forget about its method of delivery. This DAC is uncompromising, which means that you can appreciate the attack and decay of the instruments as well as the power and the glory of the music, complete with all its subtleties and shifts in mood. You can also hear the shuffling and page turning even though it doesn't strike me as the quietest piece of electronics ever to have graced the system.

There are times when it seems a shade on the dry side, but its excellent resolution of dynamics suggests that there is plenty of colour available. **JK**

## DETAILS

**PRODUCT**  
ATC CDA2

**PRICE**  
£2,153

**ORIGIN**  
UK

**WEIGHT**  
6kg

**DIMENSIONS**  
(WxHxD)  
450 x 95 x 320mm

### FEATURES

- Supported sample rates: 44.1kHz, 48kHz, 88.2kHz, 96kHz, 192kHz
- 2x RCA line inputs
- 2x optical/coaxial digital inputs
- Rear-mounted, full-size headphone output

**DISTRIBUTOR**  
ATC Loudspeaker Technology Ltd

**TELEPHONE**  
01285 760561

**WEBSITE**  
atcloudspeakers.co.uk

**REVIEWED**  
HFC 376

## Hi-Fi Choice

### OUR VERDICT

#### SOUND QUALITY

★★★★★

**LIKE:** Very revealing and tremendously dynamic with genuine low-end power

#### VALUE FOR MONEY

★★★★★

**DISLIKE:** cluttered remote; lack of pace; no USB input

#### BUILD QUALITY

★★★★★

#### FEATURES

★★★★★

**WE SAY:** A heck of a lot of CD player, preamp and DAC for the money

### OVERALL

★★★★★





# Audiolab

## 8200CD

It's been on sale for two years, but the 8200CD appears to have the looks, features and sound to impress

**T**his CD player was the first of Audioloab's latest range of electronics and caused more than a few eyebrows to be raised when it first hit the high street. It sports a sleek brushed aluminium fascia, which looks classier than the previous painted metal finish, and some serious audio engineering, courtesy of digital whizz John Westlake.

At its heart is the respected Sabre 32-bit DAC from ESS Technology, a bespoke design of digital filter with four settings and a precision-clocked CD transport. The player has recently been upgraded with an improved power supply and an OLED display, plus improved digital filter options. For the purposes of this test, the best sounding one (in the review system) is selected – in this case the Optimal Transient filter.

It can be used as a standalone digital-to-analogue convertor and there's a selection of optical and coaxial digital inputs, plus the increasingly useful USB socket for playing music files from your computer. There's even media player (Windows Media Player or iTunes)

controllability via the bundled remote. The 8200CD sports balanced XLR outputs in addition to RCA phonos, underlining its overall quality feel; operationally it's little short of excellent and the finish is such that it seems worth every penny of its selling price.

**You can listen in to all its fine detail, yet the experience is entirely natural**

### Sound quality

This player leaves a lasting impression with our blind listening panel, right from the off. It proves to be powerful, musical and extremely detailed, unlocking layer upon layer of information about the recording that others somehow seem to miss. It is like the jump in quality from CD to SACD in some ways; the sound is transformed in such a profound, eyebrow-raising way.

With the Peace Orchestra's *Marakesh*, the 8200CD gives a

wonderful texture to the keyboards, and a great feel to the electronic percussion track, which fizzles with energy. Yet all of this detail and insight doesn't come at the expense of musicality, because the Audioloab has that rare ability to fillet the recording then put it all back together again in an unerringly authentic and natural way. The result is that you can listen right in to all its fine detail, yet the overall listening experience is entirely natural.

One panelist immediately applauds it for the superb decay to the instruments on Annie Lennox's *Don't Let It Bring You Down* and the lovely natural way it all comes together. Another suggests it might sound dry, but then swiftly backtracks, deciding that in actual fact it is just extremely neutral. This is fair comment as it's not quite as warm as some similarly priced rivals, but in no way would you call it clinical or cerebral as so many of the Japanese machines can sometimes be.

The 8200CD is also applauded for its vast, three-dimensional soundstage, which is obvious no matter what music is played. This is, however, particularly evident on Peter Gabriel's *Solsbury Hill*, which blossoms into the room in a simply stunning way.

The panelists also enthuse over the clean styling, excellent build and easy ergonomics and are delighted that it sounds superb, too. **DP**

### DETAILS

**PRODUCT:** Audioloab 8200CD

**PRICE:** £800

**ORIGIN:** UK/China

**WEIGHT:** 9kg

**DIMENSIONS:** (WxHxD) 445 x 75 x 330mm

**FEATURES:** • ESS Technology Sabre 32-bit 9018 DAC

• 2x optical digital input

• USB input

• Balanced XLR outputs

**DISTRIBUTOR:** Audioloab

**TELEPHONE:** 01480 447700

**WEBSITE:** audioloab.co.uk

**REVIEWED** HFC 370 Group Test



## Hi-FiChoice

### OUR VERDICT

#### SOUND QUALITY

★★★★★

#### VALUE FOR MONEY

★★★★★

#### BUILD QUALITY

★★★★★

#### FEATURES

★★★★★

#### OVERALL

★★★★★

**LIKE:** Excellent build quality and finish; DAC functionality; superbly clean and open sound

**DISLIKE:** Absolutely nothing at the price

**WESAY:** Clean styling, supreme sound and great features make this a really impressive CD player



# Bel Canto CD2

**I**t's nice to see this – a simple, unreconstructed Compact Disc player. It doesn't have DAC functionality, streaming, USB or anything else except a place to put a lacquered 5in aluminium disc in. Press a button and it spins up, reads the disc and plays music via its line outputs around the back. So quaint. You know, this could just catch on...

The CD2 is the latest Compact Disc player from an American company (though it sounds Italian), which has traditionally taken digital audio discs very seriously. It has the feel of something that is hand built, very well, on a relatively small scale. Round the back, there's a choice of balanced XLR and RCA phono outputs, with a switch to toggle between fixed or variable outputs. There's also Toslink, S/PDIF and AES/EBU digital outputs, said to work at 24/96, and all are galvanically isolated to prevent the transmission of electrical noise. The reason for this is that the CD2 is an upsampling design, using a Burr Brown PCM1796 chipset and a slow roll-off linear phase digital filter.

## Sound quality

This is one of the least expensive *Choice Exoticas* we've done, yet the Bel Canto CD2 gives nothing away to any of the £10K loudspeakers we've reviewed in its ability to surprise and/or satisfy. This is one of the very best CD players at or indeed anywhere near the price, one that has a beautifully mellifluous and natural sound that strips away so many of the 'issues' that rain on CD's parade. The sound isn't hard, raucous or

overpowering, and it has no strange facets to its performance that mar the listening experience. Instead, it gets on with the process of playing music in the most unselfconscious way you can imagine.

Congo Ashanti's *Days Chasing Days* is joyful. I find myself immersed in the mix, enjoying the lovely, easy groove and the freedom with which the lead vocalist moves on and off the beat. The CD2 provides an immensely stable rhythmic foundation to the song, meaning it's able to relax into the music and party. To be honest, this isn't something CD is famous for doing, and indeed I've heard DACs at 10 times the price unable to pull this trick off.

Trying the Audiolab 8200CD I have to hand is a fascinating comparison. This is a far cheaper player, but still excellent, yet the Bel Canto makes it seem rather humble. Via the CD2, the spaces between the notes widens dramatically and the music seems to open up and let the listener in, in a way that the other machine can't quite manage. It also shines with a lovely treble performance that gives hi-hats a sweet yet convincingly metallic ring. This extends all the way down to the midband, making vocals – especially the more challenging female variety – sound delightfully creamy and smooth. Yet this comes from the player's apparent lack of distortion, rather than any unnatural tampering with the tone. This sort of sound is what really distinguishes a great CD player from one that's merely good.

But there are downsides, too. For example, the bass sounds slightly loose; it doesn't quite start and stop as

fast as a flickering neon light. Yet somehow it doesn't detract from the player's innate musicality, as every bass line the CD2 plays comes across in a most engaging and tuneful way. One might also comment about the slight 'thickness' in the midband – it lacks the super-fine transparency you hear in some other more expensive silver disc spinners, and the soundstage isn't quite as deep as it perhaps could be, either. Yet this machine's sheer musical cohesion completely distracts you from such minor audiophile indiscretions. Its tunefulness makes such criticism seem pedantry.

This quality dominates its performance, no matter how demanding the music you try with it. Hit the CD2 with the hard, edgy, raucous wash of noise and distortion that is My Bloody Valentine's *When You Sleep*, and it sails through it like it was a Bob Hope ditty. It cuts to the emotional chase and suddenly you feel like you're listening to a soft, lilting, romantic ballad.

Very high marks also go to the build, finish and general ergonomics of the unit. If all CD players were as good as this one, then digital downloads might still be struggling! **DP**

## DETAILS

**PRODUCT**  
Bel Canto CD2

**PRICE**  
£2,695

**ORIGIN**  
USA

**WEIGHT**  
8.2kg

**DIMENSIONS**  
(WxHxD)  
216 x 88 x 318mm

### FEATURES

- LED numeric display
- Philips CD2Pro top loading mechanism
- Balanced XLR outputs
- Switchable fixed/variable output
- Upsampling DAC

**DISTRIBUTOR**  
Aanvil Audio

**TELEPHONE**  
07721 926384

**WEBSITE**  
aanvilaudio.com

**REVIEWED**  
HFC375

## Hi-Fi Choice

### OUR VERDICT

#### SOUND QUALITY

★★★★★

**LIKE:** Gentle, musical sound; fulsome tonality; excellent transport

#### VALUE FOR MONEY

★★★★★

**DISLIKE:** Limited features compared with some rivals

#### BUILD QUALITY

★★★★★

**WE SAY:** Charming, quirky, characterful disc spinner that cuts to the musical chase

#### FEATURES

★★★★★

#### OVERALL

★★★★★



# Rotel RCD-1570

**I**f ever there was an international hi-fi company, this is it! Although production is based in China, the 52-year old company has engineering offices in the UK, USA, Japan, Korea and China, and a 60-strong R&D team including design input from the UK.

Back in the seventies, it had a name for big, showy-looking electronics, but by the early eighties it had a reputation for fettling affordable audio equipment into something quite special that remains to this day.

With extensive digital connectivity, Rotel's 15 series isn't exactly what you'd call an essay in minimalism, but it still asserts strong purist credentials. It boldly claims to "strive to make products, which offer astonishing build quality and performance at relevant price points", and that's the big idea behind the RCD-1570 – a mainstream high-quality design with the focus on flexibility and sonics.

It is something of a curio in these complicated times, being one of the few CD players not to have built-in DAC functionality. Yes, it is really an old-fashioned, unreconstructed silver disc spinner! The choice of Wolfson WM8740 DAC chip isn't radical either; it's a popular design that pops up in many modern machines.

The RCD-1570's slot-loading CD drive is a bit more off the beaten track and a very nice way to interface with a CD player. The company says, "it was the best performing and most reliable mechanism that Rotel could source". That's as maybe, but the drive mechanism is still slightly noisy – you can hear it whirring around conspicuously when playing a track.

Rotel says: "The case material is of a gauge sufficient enough to reduce the effect of resonances, and the build quality also ensures tight and consistent fit", but it could still do with extra damping in my view. The master clock is said to have had special attention paid to it, using techniques of careful supply decoupling combined with electrical isolation and rugged construction.

Curiously, the RCD-1570 recognises HDCD discs (remember them?) when inserted, showing "HDCD" on the display instead of the normal "CD-DA" – although it still plays them as standard CDs. Could this be a ghostly reminder of Rotel's previous love of this format, perhaps?

The general standard of finish, meanwhile, is actually very good, and the brushed aluminium and polished fascia edges look classy. The front panel switchgear has a nice, positive gait, although the light blue fluorescent display disappoints slightly – it looks a little crude when compared with the latest generation of OLEDs seen everywhere from Audiolab to Naim now.

## Sound quality

The RCD-1570 offers a very animated, musical sound with a strong bottom end. Rather than being matter of fact sounding like many other price rivals, it really gets into the nitty gritty of the music's rhythms and dynamics. For example, the indie-rock sound of Ultra Vivid Scene's *Special One* comes over as very bouncy and fluent, this player seemingly going out of its way to carry the emotion of the track, and deliver a really punchy, propulsive

bass. The result is a truly engaging listen, bristling with detail, yet subtle and composed, too.

With classical music, it shows itself to be an expansive performer, blessed with an unexpectedly deep soundstage. Slot in Beethoven's *Piano Concerto No.3* (Scottish Chamber Orchestra, Linn Records) and it lets rip with a rich, vibrant rendition of this brilliant recording. String tone is as natural as you'll hear from 16-bit, and the rhythm of the music flows along like the widest part of the River Clyde. Moving back to a cooking CD recording of Lou Donaldson's *Alligator Boogaloo*, and this Blue Note jazz classic comes across in a most enjoyable way. This player is a keen student of rhythm alright, and proves well able to get into the groove and keep the listener's attention – a most impressive party trick at the price.

In conclusion then, this CD player is great value – it sounds excellent and is very nicely made. Tonally it's a touch on the warm side, but it conjures up a spacious recorded acoustic, which means it warrants consideration if you're in the market for serious-sounding electronics that won't break the bank. **DP**

## DETAILS

**PRODUCT**  
Rotel RCD-1570

**PRICE**  
£700

**ORIGIN**  
Japan/China

**WEIGHT**  
6.7kg

**DIMENSIONS**  
(WxHxD)  
431 x 93 x 320mm

**FEATURES**  
• Wolfson 8740 DAC  
• 1x RCA phono line output  
• 1x XLR balanced output  
• Slot-loading CD drive  
• Remote control

**DISTRIBUTOR**  
B&W

**TELEPHONE**  
01903 221 500

**WEBSITE**  
rotel.co.uk

**REVIEWED**  
HFC 373

## Hi-Fi Choice

### OUR VERDICT

**SOUND QUALITY**

★★★★★

**VALUE FOR MONEY**

★★★★★

**BUILD QUALITY**

★★★★★

**FEATURES**

★★★★★

**OVERALL**

★★★★★

**LIKE:** Enjoyably bouncy, natural musical sound

**DISLIKE:** Display isn't pretty, slightly noisy mechanism

**WESAY:** Well built and handsome CD spinner with excellent sonics



# "I've got a feeling we're not in Kansas anymore..."

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## Oppo BDP-103EU

**O**ppo is a Chinese company that was formed back in 2004, and universal players such as this one before you here are its main *raison d'être*. The appeal of its players to the hi-res community and DVD obsessives kickstarted a fierce fanbase and Blu-ray being a similarly high-end AV early adopter territory can't have helped but expand it.

Of course, video isn't the reason we are here, so let us concern ourselves with the question of whether it can prove itself a useful substitute for the more simple surround audio universals of yesteryear? One factor in its favour is the provision of analogue surround outputs, which means that those of us who held onto pre-HDMI era AV amps can still enjoy hi-res surround. This is a very important feature, as so many manufacturers are all too willing to throw backwards audio compatibility to the wind, and just move on to the next new thing.

There are also optical and coaxial digital outputs. For the SACD-loving HDMI AV amp crowd, pure DSD can be optionally sent down HDMI. This is something of a niche facility, but then SACD devotees will doubtless think it the most important inclusion Oppo could make.

Finally, there's an optional Roku Streaming Stick MHL (Mobile High definition Link) key and a wireless adapter so that the BDP-103EU can connect to your home network and stream audio (including FLAC).

### Sound quality

For audio playback I initially try out *I Feel My Stuff* from Byrne and Eno through the coaxial digital connection, using the Oppo effectively as a CD transport. I find it highly effective, with an open soundstage and lively high frequencies. I quickly essay a stereo SACD in the shape of Propaganda's *Frozen Faces*, which for me necessitates the analogue outputs. I am instantly impressed, finding the player can deliver a warm, full, enveloping sound, even with the fairly processed strains of this eighties recording. There is a great sense of the soundstage and the bass drop before the chorus is truly deep and impressive. It's not always the case that an SACD player's analogue outputs better a direct digital CD connection, so it shows the Oppo has fine digital converters and a strong analogue output stage built-in. This isn't something that can be said for every Blu-ray player on sale.

Rooting around in the menus I am delighted to find that there is an HDCD on and off switch – why would you have it off! Once 'on', I play my HDCD remaster of Roxy Music's *Manifesto* title track, once again via analogue and I am impressed by how refined and detailed a sound this universal player is able to muster. Drums have a pleasing thickness, and Tibbs' bass a real presence – a switch back to digital confirms that it gives an inferior presentation – like turning off the 'realness' of the sound. This finding prompts me to return to the

### DETAILS

**PRODUCT**  
Oppo BDP-103EU

**PRICE**  
£499

**ORIGIN**  
China

**WEIGHT**  
4.9kg

**DIMENSIONS**  
(WxHxD)  
430 x 311 x 79mm

**FEATURES**  
• 4k video upscaling  
• Roku Streaming Stick support  
• Network streaming  
• CD, HDCD, SACD, and DVD-A support

**DISTRIBUTOR**  
Oppo BD Ltd UK

**TELEPHONE**  
0845 0609395

**WEBSITE**  
oppo-bluray.co.uk

**REVIEWED**  
HFC 367

non-HDCD Byrne and Eno disc and this time I find that through the analogue hook up, the burbling bass of *I Feel My Stuff* gives a more satisfactory rendition, which is another victory for its internal digital converters.

Reaching for my 24-bit/192kHz DVD-Audio stereo discs, I give REM's *Documenta* a spin. Here I'm not so impressed by the quality of reproduction of this great disc, which sounds a little less impactful than hoped, the Oppo erring a little towards the clinical side. More standard fare like the 24/48 stereo on Porcupine Tree's *Stupid Dream* seems less prone to this anomaly, sounding clean and dynamic. I have the suspicion, as often used to happen, that the 24/192 DVD-Audio implementation isn't the machine's strongest suit.

My only criticism would be of its relatively modest construction quality – it does feel built to a price and the ergonomics of the machine mean it's not the most satisfying to use.

Still, it is very hard to begrudge its plain looks when there's so much going on under the covers and for those of us in need of those analogue outputs it's a rare treat. **PC**

### Hi-Fi Choice

#### OUR VERDICT

##### SOUND QUALITY

★★★★★

##### VALUE FOR MONEY

★★★★★

##### BUILD QUALITY

★★★★★

##### FEATURES

★★★★★

##### OVERALL

★★★★★

**LIKE:** Everything all in one place, with networking too; decent CD, HDCD and SACD sound; price

**DISLIKE:** Full resolution stereo DVD-A not so hot; not a great looker!

**WESAY:** Great value silver disc spinner that covers all the bases





# Cambridge Audio Minox Xi

**T**he Minox Xi combines features cherry picked from Cambridge Audio's affordable separates range, packed into an even more affordable do-it-all single box. So what you get is a 40W (claimed) Class AB amplifier derived from the company's 351A integrated amp, dual Wolfson WM8728 DACs lifted from the 351C CD player, the streaming functionality of CA's NP30 network player and Bluetooth connectivity courtesy of the company's BT100 apt-X receiver.

It streams a wide array of audio formats, including FLAC, ALAC, AIFF and WAV via UPnP, although bit depth and sample rate are limited to 24-bit and 96kHz respectively. The Minox also does a dandy job of streaming internet radio from around the globe.

Connectivity-wise the Minox is well spec'd, with its front panel boasting a USB input and two 3.5mm jacks for headphones and MP3 players. Round the back another USB input joins an Ethernet port, while a third USB connects the supplied Bluetooth receiver. Two sets of analogue inputs (via RCAs) and two digital S/PDIF inputs shared over RCA (coaxial) and Toslink (optical) complete the input line up.

## Sound quality

The Minox may be small in size, but it's certainly not in sound. It's a lively little unit with a slightly forward presentation that likes to bring vocals and musical verve to the fore.

Sending Pearl Jam's *Sirens* (at 256kbps) from my iPhone 4S via the standard Bluetooth codec, garners impressive results. That the percussion is slightly fuzzy around the edges and the piano sounds a bit flat is hardly surprising, given the audio limits of my phone and the compressed bit rate. What is surprising is how much life the Minox manages to inject into the track, making the source's shortcomings far less obvious. It fills the room with Eddie Vedder's voice while keeping sibilance in check. Streaming the track over wi-fi from my PC helps sharpen things up, adding extra details to the strings while pushing more air around instruments, allowing them to find their own space, making the soundstage sound less congested.

Streaming a 16-bit/44.1kHz ALAC rip of The Smith's *This Night Has Opened My Eyes* reveals more of the Minox's cunning. Andy Rouke's walking bass lines are always a useful tool for measuring how well an amplifier can grip a speaker by the drivers and keep it in check. Via the Minox, his bass guitar is rendered with clarity, allowing me to follow its every move as his notes wander within the soundstage with lithe agility. And speaking of bass, the Minox is engineered with plenty of it, and hearing such fulsome lows suggests it is designed to get the most out of smaller/budget speakers in the lower registers. Although the Minox's bass is

surprisingly powerful, compared to Cambridge Audio's 651A integrated amplifier it's not as well controlled, and doesn't start and stop with quite the same levels of precision.

Overall, the Minox's USB input garners the best results for dedicated audiophile listening and accessing USB content via the Stream Magic app is just as easy as accessing networked media. Comparing a 16/44.1 FLAC of Ben Folds Fives' track *Don't Change Your Plans* back-to-back via USB and wi-fi adds a greater sense of midrange poise via the former method. Playing via USB, Ben Fold's piano notes have a far more natural ring, emphasising a deeper soundstage compared to the one conjured up via wi-fi streaming, and the crisp taps on the cymbals sound sharper.

In short then, this is a compact and confident all-rounder, with plenty of proper hi-fi credentials. For those already on the hi-fi ladder, the Minox will make a convenient second or bedroom system that does away with the hassle of stacks of separates. For those just starting out on their hi-fi journey, however, the Minox is an amazing value introduction into what 'proper' hi-fi should sound like. **AS**

## DETAILS

**PRODUCT**  
Cambridge Audio  
Minox Xi

**PRICE**  
£600

**ORIGIN**  
UK/China

**WEIGHT**  
5.8kg

**DIMENSIONS**  
(WxHxD)  
270 x 90 x 285mm

### FEATURES

- Network music playback (wi-fi, Ethernet and Bluetooth)
- In-built 40W amplifier
- USB, S/PDIF and analogue inputs
- Support for ALAC/WAV/FLAC/AIFF/MP3/AAC up to 24-bit/96kHz

**DISTRIBUTOR**  
Cambridge Audio

**WEBSITE**  
cambridgeaudio.com

**REVIEWED**  
HFC 379

## Hi-Fi Choice

### OUR VERDICT

#### SOUND QUALITY

★★★★★

**LIKE:** Great sound, looks and hi-fi pedigree at a bargain price

#### VALUE FOR MONEY

★★★★★

**DISLIKE:** No pre-out; front panel buttons take some learning

#### BUILD QUALITY

★★★★★

**WE SAY:** Superb value package with proper hi-fi sounds that sets a new price benchmark

#### FEATURES

★★★★★

### OVERALL

★★★★★





# Linn Akurate DSM

**E**ffectively a streaming DAC preamplifier, the multi-talented Akurate DSM plays digital music over a standard Ethernet network, but it also adds digital conversion and control functionality. This makes it both a digital music source and hub for other sources. As with all other network music players, it also streams internet radio, podcasts and 'listen again' broadcasts and it plays pretty much any format worth its salt up to 24-bit, 192kHz resolution.

As a preamplifier, it accepts 14 different inputs, including balanced XLR, RCA phono, HDMI, S/PDIF and Toslink digital, plus a front panel 3.5mm analogue input for a music portable. A moving coil or moving magnet phono stage can be configured too, the only obvious omission to its inputs being USB.

There's also the excellent Kinsky control app. It is very easy to use, and comes in PC, Mac, iPhone and iPad flavours. Before you get the Akurate going, you'll need to download it from [www.linn.co.uk/software](http://www.linn.co.uk/software).

## Sound quality

The Akurate DSM has an incredible knack of producing an uncannily 'live' sounding performance from a stream of digital ones and noughts. Even at cooking 16-bit resolution, this box of tricks is able to eke out more 'music' than many hi-res players running 24/192. And when you do crank up the quality of the source files being played, things get more detailed and

focused, but not more enjoyable – the fun comes as standard, no matter what the resolution.

A great way to show this is to feed it a rip of a really low-fi song like Motörhead's eponymous album title track. Whereas most rival designs start filleting the recording up, reducing it to individual tracks and telling you how badly recorded they are – the Akurate prefers to present the song as a homogenous whole and have fun with the rhythms and dynamics. As such, listening to Motörhead becomes a far more emotional experience than it might be; you can really feel the energy of the performance. And unlike other streamers, you're not sat wondering why it was recorded in a cave!

Switch to better produced, eighties rock and The Chameleons' *Paper Tigers* comes over with all the power you could wish for, the Akurate showing just how much scale and reach it has. Suddenly the soundstage dissolves right out of the speakers, and drops back enormously. Inside this, cascading layers of heavily processed guitar ring around, and in front there's a massive vocal presence. So sure, it can do all the 'hi-fi stuff', but just as with the heavy metal track, strangely enough your focus isn't on all this. Again, it's the emotional purchase of the music – its ability to get right into your soul and stir it up a bit – that counts. This is a powerful, moody track from a great album, and the Akurate just makes me want to listen to more.

## DETAILS

**PRODUCT**  
Linn Akurate DSM

**PRICE**  
£5,600

**ORIGIN**  
Scotland

**WEIGHT**  
5.8kg

**DIMENSIONS**  
(WxHxD)  
381 x 80 x 355mm

**FEATURES**  
• Music streaming up to 24/192  
• DAC functionality via S/PDIF and Toslink  
• Analogue line in via balanced XLR, RCA phono and 3.5mm minijack  
• HDMI pass through

**DISTRIBUTOR**  
Linn Products

**TELEPHONE**  
0141 3077777

**WEBSITE**  
[linn.co.uk](http://linn.co.uk)

**REVIEWED**  
HFC 374

A hi-res of Isaac Hayes' *Bumpy's Lament* sees this box of tricks really working on the syncopation between the drummer and bass player, and obviously enjoying the way the strings flirt with the brass. Once again, timing is the top priority, but the excellence of the recording means the Akurate is able to convey the textural richness of the violins and give the flute a lovely, natural, breathy quality. It really is a treat for sore ears.

Indeed this holds whatever type of music you're listening to, as the Linn is transparent enough to render everything it plays with great fidelity, without emphasising or indeed advertising its openness. Some rivals are also amazingly detailed, but manage to sound stark and over analytical, whereas the Akurate never does. Classical music is also great, as a hi-res David Chesky recording shows – brass is raw and raspy and strings are super sinewy, but there's never a sense that you are listening to the recording, as the music's natural purchase pushes right on through.

There are some excellent rival streaming DAC preamplifiers available, but none seem to manage the natural yet emotionally affecting sound of this one. **DP**

## Hi-Fi Choice

### OUR VERDICT

#### SOUND QUALITY

★★★★★

#### VALUE FOR MONEY

★★★★★

#### BUILD QUALITY

★★★★★

#### FEATURES

★★★★★

#### OVERALL

★★★★★

**LIKE:** Wonderfully engaging, musical sound; great functionality; fine software

**DISLIKE:** Some users may want a USB input

**WESAY:** State of the art streamer and digital hub; expensive, but great in every respect





# Linn

## Sneaky DSM

**L**inn's Sneaky DSM is a neat single-box solution that caters for network steaming, combined with digital and analogue inputs. It sits in the lower echelons of Linn's streamer range. It also comes equipped with a powerful Class D amplifier under its hood, with a claimed 33W per channel into 8 ohms.

The cherry on the Sneaky's cake is its Wolfson WM8580 DAC chip, which Linn has specified to upsample to either 176.4 or 192kHz, depending on the incoming sample rate. So when feeding it standard CD resolution content at 44.1kHz or higher-res material at 88.2kHz, you're listening to this at 176.4kHz, and 48/96kHz is output at 192kHz. It also upsamples incoming bit depth to 32-bit before downsampling to 24-bit.

The DSM works with a variety of software including UPnP, Twonky and iTunes, and caters for a plethora of file types up to 24-bit/192kHz, including FLAC, WAV, ALAC, Ogg, AAC and AIFF. Playing networked music is handled by the Kinsky app, which is Linn's playback and control interface and is available for PC, Mac and Android devices. Once installed, Kinsky will find any music stored on devices connected to your network and catalogue them in a library.

### Sound quality

With the DSM hooked up to a pair of Audiovector Mi 3 Signature speakers and playing a 16-bit/44.1kHz FLAC rip of Anna Ternheim's *Separation*

*Road* via my laptop's library (running Asset UPnP), the sound boasts impressive amounts of energy. The drums in *Girl Laying Down* come in full force, while the strings sound full of life.

The Linn makes the crafted delicacy of *No Subtle Man* sound intentionally unforced, allowing the song to gently build as the piano notes grow. And the air and space it affords the plucked guitar strings' echo ensures the soundstage has real depth, adding to the atmospherics, drawing me in.

The Linn makes vocals sound a tad more forward than I'm used to and how it presents the timbre and detail of Anna's voice gives it real drama, while avoiding sibilant edges or any suggestion of harshness.

Feeding it a 24/96kHz FLAC of Steely Dan's *Time Out Of Mind*, the Sneaky takes control as though it's being powered by Red Bull. Notes start and stop with controlled electrostatic-like precision.

The Sneaky's balanced midrange plays a key role in its overall sonic appeal. It has a smooth character that comes to the fore when delivering the relaxed sounds of Marconi Union's *Broken Colours* (24/44.1kHz FLAC), which tames the hard electronic edges of some of the effects within the track. This trait gives it an easy to live with persona because it makes the music sound fulsome, yet not overly revealing to border on fatiguing. I'd suggest the Sneaky could make a good bedfellow for speakers that err towards a bright

### DETAILS

**PRODUCT**  
Linn Sneaky DSM

**PRICE**  
£1,750

**ORIGIN**  
Scotland

**WEIGHT**  
2.4kg

**DIMENSIONS**  
(WxHxD)  
350 x 55 x 210mm

**FEATURES**  
• Music streaming up to 24-bit/192kHz  
• Supports multiple audio formats including FLAC, ALAC & WAV  
• 33W Class D amplifier  
• DAC functionality across HDMI and S/PDIF inputs

**DISTRIBUTOR**  
Linn Products

**TELEPHONE**  
0141 3077777

**WEBSITE**  
linn.co.uk

**REVIEWED**  
HFC 375

presentation, or standmount designs that major on midrange.

Getting to grips with Dusted's *Property Lines* (16/44.1), the Linn lets Brian Borchardt's stripped-back lead guitar slice through the soundstage with real attack, with its leading edges hanging in the air before falling away with convincing realism.

A hi-res 24/192 FLAC studio master of Claire Martin's *You Turned The Tables On Me* demonstrates its ability to dig deep in to the detail of the music and serve up a rich mix of natural-sounding instruments. Once again the Linn fills the soundstage with plenty of air and space, hinting at the size and quality of the recording environment and allowing me to enjoy each musician's unique contribution over and over, by revealing tantalising nuances of extra detail with each repeat listen.

When you consider the combined cost of buying a separate amp, upsampling DAC and network music streamer, the Sneaky is very good value for money. Setup is refreshingly straight forward and thanks to its engaging and balanced sound, the Sneaky DSM is far more than just a lifestyle product and can hold its own against similarly priced separates. **AS**

### Hi-Fi Choice

#### OUR VERDICT

##### SOUND QUALITY

★★★★★

**LIKE:** Excellent sound and features that belie its demure proportions

##### VALUE FOR MONEY

★★★★★

**DISLIKE:** Lack of USB input or front panel volume controls

##### BUILD QUALITY

★★★★★

**WE SAY:** Great sound and value all-in-one solution that's a hard act to beat

##### FEATURES

★★★★★

##### OVERALL

★★★★★

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# Naim UnitiQute 2

**T**he UnitiQute 2 is very much a chip off the original block and keeps the half-width casework of the previous design and sticks with having no physical controls. Indeed the only obvious change is around the back where the RS232 connection for software updates has been replaced with a mini USB port. Internally though, the changes are much more extensive. The UnitiQute 2 is now capable of handling 32/192 files and the revised tuner module now supports DAB+ for buyers fortunate enough to live in a country with a suitable network. The digital board has also been revised to a four-layer design with improved circuit paths and ground planes. Format support remains the same as before, but as the UnitiQute handles everything short of WMA lossless, you shouldn't find yourself too constrained.

The other vital statistics of the UnitiQute 2 are kept from the older model. The UnitiQute 2 has onboard UPnP streaming, analogue, digital and internet radio and a USB connection. There are four digital and a single analogue input as well as a digital output and an analogue preout. The onboard power stays put at 30W, which should be enough for most speakers.

## Sound quality

Once the UnitiQute is up and running on a network – a process that's so simple it'll take less than 10 minutes for even a rookie – it shows huge promise. The most important aspect of performance it manages from the off is that it never sounds like a small system. With Calexico's *Epic*, there is

the space, depth and impact to make the recording sound convincing. There is no shortage of volume either. There might only be 30W on tap, but Naim appears to put its watts through a bullworker.

The more you listen, the more it becomes clear that as well as mastering scale, this is a streamer with wonderful finesse and agility. The UnitiQute 2 is possessed of superb timing and an ability to start and stop that makes rival electronics seem slow and ponderous. When combined with a speaker that is equally fleet of foot the results are extremely compelling. There is a sense of life and energy that is a cut above what you might expect from a compact system.

Ray LaMontagne's *Three More Days* is simply sublime. LaMontagne's voice is locked centre stage while brass rasps and guitars snarl around, but behind him. The performance is absolutely captivating and it achieves the most important goal of any system – after 30 seconds, you actually stop analysing the performance and simply sit back and enjoy it. Across a huge variety of music, this streamer has listening pleasure down to an art.

Against this innate musicality, criticisms are slight to say the least. At low levels it can sound a little soft and restrained, but as soon as the volume starts to rise, it really comes into its own. This is fine, but it is something to bear in mind if you have neighbours that like peace and quiet.

These gripes are largely irrelevant when you spend any time with the UnitiQute 2, though. I was also responsible for the review of the

## DETAILS

**PRODUCT**  
Naim UnitiQute 2

**PRICE**  
£1,150

**ORIGIN**  
UK

**WEIGHT**  
5.6kg

**DIMENSIONS**  
(WxHxD)  
207 x 87 x 314mm

**FEATURES**  
• 32/192-capable  
UPnP client  
• 30W internal amp

**DISTRIBUTOR**  
Naim Audio Ltd

**TELEPHONE**  
01722 426600

**WEBSITE**  
naimaudio.com

**REVIEWED**  
HFC 374

original UnitiQute in 2009 and my only real criticism was that as a concept, the world might not have been ready for a product that was entirely dependent on network audio. Four years down the line and, although the Qute remains a tricky thing to explain to a potential customer as an abstract, any time spent with it has most people utterly convinced. The n-stream app has been honed and refined over the years (and is now free) and if you have an iPad, your remote will gather dust as the interface Naim has developed is now top notch. The choice of inputs and facilities will take some beating at the price.

The UnitiQute 2 will park itself on your network, collate your digital sources and can be controlled between levels of Angry Birds. As well as being easy to live with, it delivers musical enjoyment in a way systems that cost multiples more struggle to achieve. This might well be the entry-level product from Naim, but it seems to effortlessly go about making music in a way that is utterly convincing, managing to combine real-world ability with emotional talent, and you can't really ask for much more than that. **ES**

## Hi-Fi Choice

### OUR VERDICT

#### SOUND QUALITY

★★★★★

#### VALUE FOR MONEY

★★★★★

#### BUILD QUALITY

★★★★★

#### FEATURES

★★★★★

#### OVERALL

★★★★★

**LIKE:** Superb musicality, extensive features and fine build

**DISLIKE:** Limits to bass extension, sounds restrained at low levels

**WE SAY:** A winning combination of practicality, performance and genuine musicality

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\* On compliant devices.





# Naim UnitiLite

**T**he UnitiLite is the baby of the Uniti range, and it ticks all the boxes for digital operation. The only area of functionality that is optional is FM/DAB (which takes the price to the best part of £1,900). Base users get inbuilt UPnP up to the increasingly desirable 24-bit/192kHz level, the ever more important internet radio, an inbuilt CD player and a wide variety of front and rear-accessible analogue and digital inputs, including a preamp output on Naim DIN sockets should you wish to extend the system. The internal amplifier is rated at 50W per channel into 8 ohms.

## Sound quality

One of the great benefits of the UnitiLite is the step up to 24/192 capability from the Squeeze world of 24/96 limits. Many would say this is a waste of time, but with old top-rate stereo DVD-Audio rips and HDTracks increasingly offering analogue masters transferred at the higher sampling rate, the results can be stunning. In the former category, Grover Washington Jr's *Winelight* finally has the crystal-clear latin percussion and thudding Marcus Miller bass to match the original. In the latter category the robotic backing track to Lionel Richie's *Can't Slow Down* fizzles with great timing and Rod Stewart's seventies solo albums have a marvellous organic analogue warmth to them.

Moving on to 16/44.1 FLAC material, I use the initial segue from *Emergency Contraception Blues* into *Lamplight* from Bombay Bicycle Clubs's debut album to check for correct gapless playback from a

Twonky server, a test which is passed with flying colours. Musically the compressed washes and the overflowing bass sound of the latter track are marshalled and contained, when it can sometimes just sound like a mess. A similar ability to resolve a musical picture out of a very busy and compressed signal is noted with the 24/96 version of *BU2B* from Rush's latest. CD playback is a slight disappointment. The Proclaimers' *Sunshine on Leith* sounds a lot flatter than via network playback. It is smooth enough alright, but it's not the core competency of the UnitiLite.

What Naim terms iRadio is obviously the now near-ubiquitous and highly useful internet radio. What's nice is the way Naim has preconfigured its menus for less adventurous types like me who tend to stick with the good old BBC. The front page of the selection interface in N-stream highlights some currently Beta 'hi-def' streams from the BBC. While this is a terrible misnomer it does at least mean that we can have speech on Radio 4 at a very acceptable 128kbps AAC, making John Humphreys sound big and butch rather than weedy and thin. Even better, a quick turn to Radio 3 and I happen upon some Clementi being played by Howard Shelley and the piano sounds fantastic – deep, rich and full of timbre. A great recording rendered solidly across the internet!

The front-mounted USB port is obviously primarily there for iPod connectivity and a very fine job indeed is made of this function. The control is taken over by the front panel/N-stream and the operating paradigm remains the same as for

streaming music. The real benefit for N-stream use is that the same rich virtual sleeve-note information from Rovi is available on the iPad for your iPod music. The Bombay Bicycle gapless test runs smoothly and the iTunes Plus quality AAC version is not a million miles away from the streaming lossless version.

The 3.5mm stereo input auto-switches to its input channel on insertion of the mini-jack. As I'm testing with the iPod Nano the audible results are a little flat, but this could be put down to its headphone stage. Interestingly, in an Apple-alike move, this port is also dual-use analogue and digital (using an optical cable or adapter).

In conclusion, the UnitiLite is a very easy device to live with – there are no niggles in its operation, the remote is comfortable and intuitive to use. I suspect that most of those who adopt streaming with one will cease to use the CD player part in short order, which begs the question of why it's included, but then we know the rationale, don't we? Overall, here's a great-sounding and affordable system that's been pitched deftly between the hardcore hi-fi world and those who just like listening to music! **PC**

## DETAILS

**PRODUCT**  
Naim UnitiLite

**PRICE**  
£1,650

**ORIGIN**  
UK

**WEIGHT**  
7.5kg

**DIMENSIONS**  
(WxHxD)  
432 x 70 x 301mm

### FEATURES

- Analogue inputs: 2x RCA, front-mounted 3.5mm
- Digital inputs: 2x optical S/PDIF (24/96), 2x coaxial S/PDIF (24/192)
- Computer inputs: front-mounted iPod/USB port
- Networking: 10/100Mbps Ethernet and 802.11b/g/n wi-fi options

**DISTRIBUTOR**  
Naim Audio Ltd

**TELEPHONE**  
01722 426600

**WEBSITE**  
naimaudio.com

**REVIEWED**  
HFC 369

## Hi-Fi Choice

### OUR VERDICT

#### SOUND QUALITY

★★★★★

#### VALUE FOR MONEY

★★★★★

#### BUILD QUALITY

★★★★★

#### FEATURES

★★★★★

#### OVERALL

★★★★★

**LIKE:** Great all-round usability; excellent sound via streaming; fine build

**DISLIKE:** More flexible USB drive compatibility would be nice

**WE SAY:** Brilliant all-in-one system for your first file-based foray!





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James Brown

# The heart and soul of music

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## T+A Cala

Prepare to be beguiled by T+A's compact new single-box streaming music system, it's unlike anything you've ever seen before

**E**ven though modern audio products seem to be becoming more derivative, I don't think I've seen anything quite like the T+A Cala receiver before. There's nothing new about receivers of course – combining a tuner with an amplifier is simply commonsense and I've written in the past about my surprise that there aren't more of them. However, to take this format and combine a very traditional implementation with all the latest facilities like the Cala does, has resulted in a fascinating product whose rigorously logical concept will, I'm sure, appeal to many.

As well as being a capable amplifier (55 Watts into 4 ohms is the claimed output) and an FM RDS tuner, the Cala can also act as a gateway to a computer-based music collection (including MP3, AAC, FLAC and WAV

files) via a wired or a wireless DLNA network, and through the same link gives access to internet radio stations. It also has a Bluetooth receiver (built to the A2DP standard) for direct access to the content held on portable devices and a USB connection for the addition of a local drive or an iPod. Two analogue sources can also be catered for (such as CD player, tape deck or a turntable and suitable phono stage, so the Cala can form the centrepiece of quite a comprehensive audio system.

What is really interesting is what has been left out, there's no DAB tuner for example (hurrah!) – who needs it when you have access to internet radio for the widest programme choice and normal FM for the best sound quality? There are also no S/PDIF digital inputs for a CD transport or another digital source, since it is presumed that all digital

content will be coming over the network connection.

This all makes good sense, why load up the chassis with connections and modes that will never be used? The designers haven't stopped there, though. There are no controls on the unit itself, so everything has to be done remotely, either with the supplied handset or with an iPad application that you can download.

This, however, seems less logical. Imagine how annoying it would be if you wanted to switch the music off or to reduce the volume in order to answer the telephone or to receive guests, only to find that whatever you normally use to control the Cala was not to hand! Maybe there should be a concealed on/mute/off switch on the next version? There's also no headphone socket and no analogue output other than that for the loudspeakers, so you can't use it with an external amp or to record from.

Technically, the Cala uses a bridged Class D amplifier powered by a switch mode power supply to provide the muscle. All signal processing is done in the digital domain with 24-bit resolution, so the output of the tuner and the two analogue inputs are digitised before they enter the amplifier circuit. The sensitivities of these two inputs can be set in the menus to equalise the volume setting

### ► DETAILS

#### PRODUCT

T+A Cala

#### PRICE

£1,490

#### ORIGIN

Germany/China

#### WEIGHT

4kg

#### DIMENSIONS

(WxHxD)

300 x 95 x 210mm

#### FEATURES

- 55W amplifier
- FM RDS tuner
- UPnP streaming client
- A2DP Bluetooth interface
- Remote control with supplied IR handset or Apple iPad application

#### DISTRIBUTOR

Avoke Ltd

#### TELEPHONE

07876 246956

#### WEBSITE

avoke.co.uk

#### REVIEWED

HFC 368



for all the sources. A large display on the front shows all the menu functions as well as what is playing.

Setting up the network is as baffling as always, but once all the numbers are typed in access is pretty simple if your server is DLNA compatible. The FM tuner is a single chip type similar to that used in mobile phones and can be connected to an outdoor antenna through an F-type connector.

Styling is both striking and modern and as you would expect from T+A, the finish is flawless. The main cabinet is formed by an aluminium extrusion with the front panel and the top surface finished in polished acrylic. The electrical screening properties of the thick aluminium are claimed to be very good, but the black plastic attracts (and shows) dust to an alarming degree – if the set were mine I think I'd use the slot underneath to keep a duster in, although it will also hold a copy of *Hi-Fi Choice*, not that the designers would have had either of these applications in mind I'm sure!

Even though it is small, the Cala's powerful amplifier should drive most loudspeakers with ease, but for those who want a really neat installation T+A offers a matching model called the CS Mini. Inside each tiny cabinet are a 100mm bass driver and a 25mm cloth dome tweeter, along with a forward-facing bass reflex port. Together the Cala and the CS Minis are supplied complete and ready to run except for loudspeaker cables; I use a Chord Company Odyssey 2 set for my listening tests.

### Sound quality

I decide to check out the loudspeakers first by connecting them to my Cyrus 6A amplifier and CD8SE 2 CD player. The results are not great, with far too much uncontrolled bass, which quickly smothers the rest of the music. Initially they give the same results with the Cala too, but I eventually discover a menu where these and a few other T+A loudspeaker models can be selected by name, and by doing this and changing the 'LF Shape' setting from its default 'Bass extd' to 'Full range' brings about an impressive transformation. They'll never sound like full-sized loudspeakers, of course, but given how small the cabinets are, the sound is impressive once all the settings are correctly entered – make sure that you do this if you decide to buy a Cala. The sound can also be corrected for where the speakers are placed (free/wall/corner/shelf etc) which is useful, each mode giving

roughly appropriate results for the relevant position.

Plugging the CD8SE 2 into the Cala shows that the amplifier is highly capable and doesn't suffer from typical problems of cheaper Class D implementations – jagged treble and high background noise. Tonally the main impression is one of warmth with a notable presence dip and an obvious bass lift, but overall the results are very pleasant indeed with the cloth tweeters filling in the top end with sweet, relaxed treble. Basia Trzetrzelewska's soaring vocals in the track *Brave New Hope* (from the album of the same name) are reproduced with a fine sense of scale, rising from the rest of the mix and leaving the warm (but slightly muddled) bass line behind. The Cala and the CS Minis are not a challenging listen; instead they give the type of presentation that it is very easy just to sink into.

### Given how small the cabinet speakers are, the sound is pretty impressive

Raising the volume predictably shows that the loudspeakers begin to break up at the bottom end long before the amplifier runs out of puff, substituting a pair of Monitor Audio PL100s reveals that there is plenty of drive available if you want to make a lot of noise with the little box.

I thought that the Cala would be too relaxed for the likes of *Nasty* by Janet Jackson (from the album *Control*), but even though its easygoing sonic signature is definitely there, the track is still performed with energy and pace, the endless transients don't seem to trouble the Class D amplifier or the cloth tweeters that much. In the final analysis I find the focus to be ever so slightly soft, but digitally transferring both albums to a USB drive and connecting this directly helps a lot in this respect. Clearly there is a benefit to avoiding two self-cancelling stages of data conversion. Ditto the network streaming side, which brings about a substantial improvement over the line inputs.

I am keen to try the tuner section as well, since many other modern FM stages are compromised by being part of a software-controlled combined FM/DAB front end. Using a roof-mounted omni directional antenna I discover that the Cala is capable of surprisingly good

FM reception and to be adequately sensitive, although an attempt with the supplied indoor FM aerial is much less successful.

There is clearly a 'high blend' system in operation, which makes FM sound very muddled when signal levels are low, but once the signal strength meter is over about three quarters on the scale things open up really nicely and the results are notably superior to low-rate internet broadcasts and DAB. BBC Radio 4 reveals a solid soundstage and clear vocal presentation with only a small amount of sibilance present, normally with female presenters.

In contrast to the other sources, I am aware of a presence lift, which makes the sound seem starker and less luxurious, but nevertheless I consider the results very good. BBC Radio 3's classical output is also handled well, and clearly demonstrates why the BBC says that you won't necessarily benefit from its increased resolution internet broadcasts of this station if you have a decent FM receiver already.

### Conclusion

T+A's new Cala system performs admirably, even though it is perhaps not as versatile as a keen audiophile might like. Only the confusing and cheap-looking plastic remote control unit detracts, but T+A can offer a nicer-looking metal one as an accessory. I'd also liked to have seen a 'standby' indicator on the front panel as it is currently not possible to tell that the unit is powered up unless it is actually playing.

At £1,490 for the main unit and an extra £600 for the loudspeakers the Cala isn't cheap, but then as everybody knows quality always costs a little bit extra. As a compact and unobtrusive way to get your digital music collection out into the room the Cala certainly deserves a very strong recommendation. **TJ**

The minimalist Cala means everything is done via the supplied handset or iPad app

### Hi-Fi Choice

#### OUR VERDICT

##### SOUND QUALITY



**LIKE:** Modern concept, excellent build, strong sonic performance

##### VALUE FOR MONEY



**DISLIKE:** No on-board controls or standby indicator; no digital ins

##### BUILD QUALITY



**WE SAY:** Excellent single box system that combines FM radio and streaming sources

##### FEATURES



##### OVERALL





# Arcam irDAC

The predecessor to Arcam's latest digital convertor shone in a previous *Group Test* – so how will it fare this time?

**I**t was Arcam, lest we forget, that invented the DAC – in the sense of a separate digital-to-analogue convertor unit that sat 'outboard' the CD player. The Black Box appeared in 1988, and in a way every DAC that you see in the pages that follow this one owe a debt to it. Arcam now sells a range of DACs, of which this is the middle product. It's effectively a replacement for the rDAC, which wowed the hi-fi world with its superb sound at just £300 a couple of years back. This irDAC is bolstered by the addition of improved circuitry, more inputs and infra-red remote control.

The case is a larger version of the rDAC, retaining the beautiful cast alloy shell and rubberised base, and elegant top-mounted input switching and back of LED source indicators. Round the back there are now two each of optical, coaxial and USB inputs – with a rear panel switch between USB Class I and II; the former is a direct iPhone input that takes the digital signal direct from an Apple device. There's a digital output and a pair of RCA phonsos.

Inside, Arcam uses a Burr Brown PCM1796 DAC chip, with improved post filter topology, which is claimed to give improved group delay characteristics. Eight separately regulated power supplies are fitted, and high-quality passive components used, including WIMA capacitors on the four-layer printed circuitboard. The irDAC is said to be firmware updatable via a PC app, and it can also be powered directly from an Arcam amplifier or AV receiver.

**It romps into the swing of things like a puppy running out into the garden**

## Sound quality

It doesn't take long to realise that this is a mighty impressive DAC. With its big-hearted, musically inviting nature, every type of music we play comes across really very well. One of our listening panelists remarks how he is able to: "Hear the music rather than the equipment", and that just about

## DETAILS

**PRODUCT**  
Arcam irDAC  
**PRICE**  
£400  
**ORIGIN**  
UK  
**WEIGHT**  
0.7kg  
**DIMENSIONS**  
(WxHxD)  
160 x 40 x 100mm  
**FEATURES**  
• 32, 44.1, 48, 88.2, 96, 176.4 and 192kHz  
• 16, 24-bit  
• Asynchronous USB, 2x coaxial, 2x optical  
• iPod input  
**DISTRIBUTOR**  
Arcam  
**TELEPHONE**  
01233 203200  
**WEBSITE**  
arcam.co.uk  
**REVIEWED**  
HFC 379 Group Test

sums up this digital-to-analogue convertor. It doesn't have a technical, analytical sort of sound, instead it romps into the swing of things like a puppy running out into the garden. It's full of fun, eagerness and the general joys of life.

For example, tape hiss on the opening of Kraftwerk's *The Robots* is unusually easy to hear, the Arcam appears to scythe through the mix straight to the action. It proves excellent on transients, and gives a dramatically dynamic presentation, propulsive rhythms and a fine sense of the gated sequencers playing in the background. Never less than rhythmically alluring, it is always a fun thing to set ears on.

Tonally the Arcam is quite rich. It isn't what you'd call thin or cerebral and doesn't tend to over smooth music. It gives plenty of weight to Bruce Springsteen's *NYC Serenade* and shows off all the shiny, lustrous harmonics on the piano work. Bass is one of the strongest here and has real pitch to it – the result is that you can bop along to the Kraftwerk track, and given fine sounding hi-res material such as Kate Bush's *Snowflake*, it is wonderfully immersive and satisfying. One panel member comments that the Kraftwerk kick drum really impresses. "It's really good, prick-up-your-ears stuff" he says. Overall, the panel agree the irDAC is a superb device in every respect and one of Arcam's best budget offerings. **DP**



## Hi-Fi Choice

### OUR VERDICT

#### SOUND QUALITY

★★★★★

#### VALUE FOR MONEY

★★★★★

#### BUILD QUALITY

★★★★★

#### FEATURES

★★★★★

**LIKE:** Dynamic, snappy rhythms; lustrous tonality; fine build; style

**DISLIKE:** No headphone output; that's all

**WE SAY:** Superb sounding, beautifully presented and affordable DAC

### OVERALL

★★★★★



# Audiolab

## Q-DAC

Its big brother was our DAC of the year back in 2012, so the little Q has got quite a reputation to live up to!

**F**ollowing on from the success of the M-DAC a couple of years back, Audiolab recently launched a stripped-down version with a slightly cheaper DAC chip and no rotary volume control or balanced XLR audio output sockets. Effectively a DAC preamp, the Q-DAC is very well specified, being built around the latest 32-bit ESS Sabre 9016 DAC chip, which runs at up to 24/192 resolution and sports seven adjustable digital filter settings.

It has a good range of connections, including one coaxial, one optical and one asynchronous USB input, plus digital coaxial and optical outputs.

The fascia has an excellent and informative OLED display, plus a bank of fiddly buttons that cover input selection and volume control, should you wish to use it as a preamplifier. There's also a front panel-mounted 6.3mm headphone socket, with the accompanying built-in amplifier, naturally. Inside, the manufacturer claims, much attention has been paid to reducing jitter, and there are triple cascaded jitter attenuation stages to ensure that it is kept to a minimum,

as well as a high-current Class A analogue output stage. The Q also has a truly massive separate off-board power supply, however; this doesn't stop it from being an incredibly flexible DAC with a wide range of features that are all implemented very

**This is one of the fastest, tightest and controlled DACs around**

well. The aluminium casework is superbly finished and the product feels far more upmarket than its £400 asking price would suggest.

### Sound quality

The Q-DAC delivers a sound that is in many ways very deep and three dimensional, along with an impressive sense of the spaces between the notes where the Arcam opposite tends to slur them more into one. However, tonally the Audiolab isn't quite as good – it simply doesn't have the former's richness and textural insight. This means that on

### DETAILS

**PRODUCT**  
Audiolab Q-DAC

**PRICE**  
£400

**ORIGIN**  
UK/China

**WEIGHT**  
3kg

**DIMENSIONS**  
(WxHxD)  
247 x 60 x 236mm

**FEATURES**  
• 32, 44.1, 48, 88.2, 96, 176.4 and 192kHz  
• 16, 24-bit  
• Asynchronous USB, 1x coaxial, 1x optical  
• Headphone output

**DISTRIBUTOR**  
IAG

**TELEPHONE**  
01480 447700

**WEBSITE**  
audiolab.co.uk

**REVIEWED**  
HFC 379 Group Test

Beth Rowley's *Nobody's Fault But Mine*, for example, the plucked steel guitar strings sound slightly thinner and more needly than they really should. Her voice doesn't quite have the body or the vibrancy that they display on the Arcam, but by the same token the Q-DAC manages to separate out all the strands of the mix with enormous confidence and poise – the irDAC never sounds wobbly, but the Q is definitely more secure.

Bruce's Springsteen *NYC Serenade* again throws lots of light on things, and shows the Audiolab to be one of the fastest, tightest and controlled DACs around, but it doesn't quite have the textural richness on piano that the Arcam possess; there is less of a sense that the Q enjoys playing the musical notes and more that it is intellectually interested in showing the gaps between them. One listener says: "It does rhythm pretty well, but there's a lack of complexity to the timbre of everything". Another adds: "It's like you're getting the main image, but not so much behind it... there's nothing to go and explore".

Maybe this overstates things a touch and lots of praise does go to the bass. Although it's not the richest, it's well extended and integrates well with the rest of the frequency spectrum. The DAC also images well, and puts up a very wide stereo soundstage. Excellent overall, our panel is universal in agreeing that it's a lot of product for the money. **DP**



## Hi-Fi Choice

### OUR VERDICT

#### SOUND QUALITY

★★★★★

**LIKE:** Great sonics; fine feature set; super build

#### VALUE FOR MONEY

★★★★★

**DISLIKE:** Fiddly volume control; nothing else at the price

#### BUILD QUALITY

★★★★★

**WE SAY:** Excellent little budget audiophile DAC with built-in preamp

#### FEATURES

★★★★★

#### OVERALL

★★★★★



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# Audio Research Reference DAC

**T**he Audio Research Reference DAC is a veritable high-end archetype: it features overkill engineering, uses valves, weighs a ton and has grab handles. The DAC offers seven connections on the rear and one on the fascia for USB memory sticks. The seven rear connections are USB2.0 HS, S/PDIF through RCA and BNC, AES/EBU, Toslink, Ethernet, iPod, and USB. One would certainly be hard pushed to find a domestic digital connection that was not covered by the Reference DAC, which up-samples 44.1kHz (CD-quality) and 48kHz sources to 176.4kHz or 192kHz.

## Sound quality

The sound of the Reference DAC has a delightful warmth and harmonic completeness that is unlike the sound of most hi-fi, which seems painfully thin and artificial by comparison. It even renders jazz guitarist, Bill Frisell's guitar harmonics on *Pipe Down* with a genuinely rich and complex tonality. The sound is neither warm nor euphonic or overblown: it simply has credible substance and authority – a wholly desirable feature.

The next rip is Frisell's take on the Marvin Gaye classic, *I Heard it Through the Grapevine*. There is no background noise whatsoever so low-level detail leaps out enthusiastically from this live recording. The supremely transparent track defines the terms detail and

tonal colour: every instrument is gloriously etched and natural in its sound and presentation. There is also a beautifully crafted soundstage, with Frisell playing to the right in front of the drums and the bass guitar standing forward to the left. Each instrument is painstakingly detailed – dynamically as well as in terms of note shape and space – creating the overall sound of an entirely believable ensemble. The presentation is among the most plausible I have experienced: thoroughly involving, wholly believable, and musically inviting. The music is completely coherent and cohesive: it does not suffer from exaggerated dynamics or detail – although genuine dynamics have authentic drama and impact. Perhaps what impresses the most is the vivid tonal colour of the guitar and the variety of sounds the instrument produces, along with the power and vibrant texture of the bass and drums. Equally impressive is the outstanding ability to convey timing nuances and the feel and groove the players inject into the performance.

William Carter playing early works of Fernando Sor shows that the Reference DAC can be equally as scrupulous when rendering the sumptuous texture of a solo baroque guitar and the space around it, in Linn Records 24/192 recording of the piece. The instrument virtually comes alive in the space between the speakers in front of me. Many DACs have rendered the sound of this challenging instrument as rather flat,

lifeless and devoid of character, but the AR brings out its full body resonance and the vibrant vitality of its strings.

Mary Coughlan's *You Go to My Head*, recorded with a small band, sounds not unlike an audiophile demonstration disc. Each instrument is allocated its own distinct position and acoustic space within an impressively wide and deep soundstage. It is easy to listen to any of the instruments within the predominantly acoustic lineup and to follow them in meticulous detail such as the levels of separation and dynamic gradation.

The Reference DAC emerges triumphantly with no deficiencies in any respect; its abilities in terms of masterly handling of frequency extremes, tonal colour, leading edges, and dynamics are absolutely beyond reproach. Its musical performance is little short of sublime and as a product it is not just a single unit: it is, and I will try not to miss a single category; a multiple input DAC, a network streamer, an internet radio, a memory stick player, a preamplifier and an iPod dock. All round then, it's an absolute winner, no matter which angle you approach it from. **MS**

## DETAILS

**PRODUCT**  
Audio Research  
Reference DAC

**PRICE**  
£14,000

**ORIGIN**  
USA

**WEIGHT**  
14.6kg

**DIMENSIONS**  
(WxHxD)  
480 x 178 x 394mm

### FEATURES

- UPnP streamer
- Wired and Wireless LAN connections
- Output impedance: 600 ohms balanced
- Digital sample rates: 44.1kHz to 192kHz wired and 96kHz wireless

**DISTRIBUTOR**  
Absolute Sounds

**TELEPHONE**  
0208 9713909

**WEBSITE**  
absolutesounds.com

**REVIEWED**  
HFC 373

## Hi-Fi Choice

### OUR VERDICT

#### SOUND QUALITY

★★★★★

**LIKE:** Performance and transparency is exemplary

#### VALUE FOR MONEY

★★★★★

**DISLIKE:** No choice of interconnects other than XLR

#### BUILD QUALITY

★★★★★

#### FEATURES

★★★★★

**WE SAY:** Fabulous DAC that is overflowing with playback options and is worth every penny of that hefty price tag

#### OVERALL

★★★★★





# Heed Obelisk da

**T**he Obelisk da is Heed Audio's multiple input, remote-controllable digital-to-analogue converter, which is now available with the latest version – 2.1 – of the DACtil DAC card. The new V2.1 DAC card aims to provide “greater refinement and musical enjoyment” over its much-admired predecessor. It is available either fitted to the Obelisk da DAC at £1,500 – the standard da is £1,300, and will continue to be sold – or as a £450 upgrade for the Obelisk pre or existing owners of the da, and brings 192kHz/24-bit capability, including USB, to the range courtesy of Wolfson's WM8741 DAC and the ubiquitous XMOS USB Audio Class 2.0 high speed chipset. A USB driver is freely available for download from Heed's website to install onto your Windows computer, which, unlike the Mac, requires a driver to be installed.

## Sound quality

The first music to be auditioned is the title track from Steve Earle's *Copperhead Road*. The Obelisk da impresses from the first bar with a presentation that manages to be rich and full-blooded yet simultaneously scrupulously agile, detailed and delicate. In particular it picks out the leading edges on guitars distinctly and so powers *Copperhead Road* along at a relentless pace. Both the timing and Earle's diction seem deliciously sharply etched and precise.

The more relaxed demeanour of Emile Sandé's *Clown* demonstrates just how capably the Obelisk casts a stereo image, according it both a good lateral spread and credible and consistent force to aft depth. Her

piano is delightfully articulated, while her magnificent voice demonstrates fine chiaroscuro and a beguiling frailty at its extremes, which lends the music an engaging humanity, candour and conviction.

The Heed Obelisk da proves itself to be an exceptionally revealing device with eye-of-the-needle precision, yet not once does it ever sound forced or overbearing. Its revelatory powers are reassuringly subtle and never in your face like some supposedly high-end equipment can be. It doesn't uncover detail and then force it down the listener's throat. Rather it gently highlights subtleties and nuances in the music of which one probably had previously been unaware. Suddenly I notice, say, the slight bend or choking of a guitar string and realise how relevant it is to the music being played. Such information becomes plentifully apparent on Bill Frisell's *Sign Of Life* where the da effortlessly delineates the guitar and violin when both are simultaneously playing an identical pizzicato melody. This seems to be a function of its precise dynamic expression and deft capability with note-shape definition that allows it to step aside and let the performance pass unhindered. This probably also explains why it has an inherently analogue quality to its sound. It should being a DAC, naturally, but it has an outstandingly easy-going naturalness and flow that is so very rare, especially in the digital equipment domain.

I am heartened to note that the Heed regularly displays its disarming precision, where quite without any effort it alerts the listener to some aspect of the music, which might not

have been as apparent before. This is not the case of previously unheard instruments appearing in a track, but more likely a deft but unnoticed piece of phrasing or subtle dynamic contrast being brought to light and its musical relevance being made abundantly clear.

The Heed da also provides a noteworthy performance playing through the USB connection on my laptop, which many hi-fi designers have told me ought to provide the best connection available.

Using the 24/192kHz recording of The Scottish Chamber Orchestra playing Beethoven's *Piano Concerto 3*, it becomes abundantly apparent that the Heed is able to exhibit its vivid, welcoming and thoroughly analogue character on this hi-resolution material. The sound of the ensemble highlights vivid tonal colour, depth and natural fullness – in particular the piano – along with plenty of fine detail resolution and focus. Dynamic scaling is dramatic and the unit resolves the acoustic signature of the recording venue convincingly.

The Heed proves its capabilities with a highly diverse selection of music, nothing proves too challenging and it consistently reveals finesse. **MS**

## DETAILS

**PRODUCT**  
Heed Obelisk da

**PRICE**  
£1,500

**ORIGIN**  
Hungary

**WEIGHT**  
4kg

**DIMENSIONS**  
(WxHxD)  
220 x 85 x 325mm

### FEATURES

- Resolution: maximum 24-bit
- Sampling frequency: 32, 44.1, 48, 96, 192kHz
- S/PDIF – I<sup>2</sup>S converter: Cirrus Logic CS8416
- Analogue filter: capacitor coupled passive band-pass network

**DISTRIBUTOR**  
RPD Distribution

**TELEPHONE**  
01242 547663

**WEBSITE**  
heedaudio.hu/en

**REVIEWED**  
HFC 373

## Hi-Fi Choice

### OUR VERDICT

#### SOUND QUALITY

★★★★★

#### VALUE FOR MONEY

★★★★★

#### BUILD QUALITY

★★★★★

#### FEATURES

★★★★★

#### OVERALL

★★★★★

**LIKE:** Dramatic, refined and sophisticated sound, plays more to music's considerations

**DISLIKE:** Outputs and filtration should not be user-selectable.

**WE SAY:** One of the finest USB-capable DACs available, probably at any price



# Longdog Audio VDt1

**T**he objective of this stripped-down, minimalist machine is – in the words of designer Nick Gorham – to be a digital convertor that “plays PCM as well as it can”. It also gives Direct Stream Digital playback, too – DSD 64 only, 128 isn’t supported. At the Longdog’s heart is a Japanese-sourced and uncommon Asahi Kasei AK4396 DAC chip, chosen because in Nick’s view it was the best sounding around for his intended application.

The front panel knob selects between three inputs (two coaxial and one USB) and there’s a bank of handy LEDs to indicate power, error condition, DSD and HS Coax.

The Longdog will work at the usual 16-bit/44.1kHz to 24-bit/192kHz resolution; it will accept 32-bit signals, but won’t process them. The USB 2 interface supports DSD over USB, 64-bit DSD and has automatic switching between PCM and DSD. Either of its two coaxial digital input sockets can be repurposed as Toslink or AES XLR inputs to special order, or the RCA audio outputs can be changed for XLRs.

## Sound quality

This is a warm, expansive performer that will delight analogue addicts, thanks to its particularly natural tonal balance. Instead of a rather lean, analytical, matter-of-fact sound that you often get from DACs, the Longdog gives a smooth and sweet – if not quite sumptuous – performance that makes extended listening a

pleasure. Simple Minds’ *Someone, Somewhere, In Summertime* fizzles with energy, and then the kick drum comes in loud enough to remind you that your windows are made from breakable glass. It’s a massive, gutsy sort of sound that makes even dCS’ superb high-end Debussy DAC look rather over polite. And the great thing is that it’s not just big and punchy in a hi-fi sort of way, it’s actually very naturally musically satisfying, too.

Staying with 16-bit CD as a source, and The Jam’s classic *Down In A Tube Station At Midnight* thunders out. Although packed with anger, it’s a pretty thin and reedy-sounding recording and can underwhelm, especially on CD, but this DAC isn’t having that. Instead, it serves up an engrossing sound that perfectly catches the expressive, plaintive tones of Paul Weller’s vocals, and drives home every last ounce of the song’s powerful emotion. Unlike so many DACs it simply doesn’t stand in the way of the musical event. Indeed, the VDt1 proves wonderfully subtle, yet involving in its presentation; vocals hover ethereally in a wide soundstage, against a backdrop of the powerful bass guitar.

Rather than treading the well-worn, respectable path of trying to cover all the bases, it goes steaming into recordings to see what it can pull back out with breathtaking energy.

Feed it some hi-res music via its USB input and it really begins to shine. Art of Noise’s *Moments in Love* at 24/88.2 is just superb, the DAC

## DETAILS

**PRODUCT**  
Longdog Audio VDt1

**PRICE**  
£3,650

**ORIGIN**  
UK

**WEIGHT**  
8kg

**DIMENSIONS**  
(WxHxD)  
450 x 240 x 120mm

**FEATURES**  
• 16 to 24-bit, 44.1kHz to 192kHz PCM; DSD 64 playback  
• Asahi Kasei AK4396 DAC chip  
• Tube output stage with 2x Philips 5687s  
• Galvanically isolated inputs

**DISTRIBUTOR**  
Mains Cables R Us

**TELEPHONE**  
07908 056978

**WEBSITE**  
mcru.co.uk

**REVIEWED**  
HFC 377

capturing the synthesised rhythm backing beautifully, giving a very realistic sense of texture. At the same time, those big synth stabs sound powerful and menacing, and backing vocals creamily smooth. The Longdog sets up a spacious soundstage that hangs back well, but projects powerfully into the room, too. Everything seems to syncopate so convincingly; sparse electronic music such as this relies on the rhythmic interplay between instruments for effect, and in this case it proves the DAC’s fine timing. For me, the ability to combine believable tonality with fine timing isn’t universal in a DAC of any price, let alone this, so the VDt1 is in good company.

In conclusion the VDt1 can hold its head high even among more expensive types in terms of pure sonics. It isn’t as swish looking as some rivals, because much of the budget has gone on the sound. If you’re looking for a minimalist, high-performance digital convertor, then the Longdog VDt1 illustrates how less can be more! If you take your digital and/or computer audio seriously, but aren’t too concerned about a vast range of features, it’s an essential audition. **DP**

## Hi-Fi Choice

### OUR VERDICT

#### SOUND QUALITY

★★★★★

#### VALUE FOR MONEY

★★★★★

#### BUILD QUALITY

★★★★★

#### FEATURES

★★★★★

#### OVERALL

★★★★★

**LIKE:** Very natural, musical, organic sound with power and punch

**DISLIKE:** It could do with a sampling rate display and some more inputs

**WE SAY:** Single-minded audiophile product purposed for top performance



# CONVERT ORDINARY TO EXTRAORDINARY



## DAC-V1 Digital to Analogue Converter

Using our unique digital signal processing technology the DAC-V1 can transform your computer into a high-resolution music hub. It can also unleash the sound of digital sources like your TV, games console, and hard disk player/server too. Listen directly through headphones or add our matching NAP 100 power amplifier and speakers to create a compact, high-end hi-fi system.

If, like us, you really care about music, the new DAC-V1 is for you.

Discover more online: [naimaudio.com/dac-v1](http://naimaudio.com/dac-v1)







# NAD

## D 1050

A brand new look for a company on the move, meet this cleverly designed, affordable new black box

**N**ew Acoustic Dimension, as the company used to call itself back in the good old days, has made quite a splash recently with the introduction of a range of affordable electronics set into a new form factor by industrial designer David Farrage, who has also done NAD's VISO I speaker dock, among other things. Like its partnering D 3020 amplifier (reviewed *HFC* 379), the D 1050 DAC sports the radical new casework that can be used either horizontally or vertically. It has a very swish front display that backlights the input selected and the sampling frequency – the large knob selects the digital source and there's a 3.5mm headphone socket.

This new NAD box feels nice to use – although the action of the source selector switch isn't the slickest – and you can't help liking the rubberised case with its bright metal grille set behind it. This gives a welcome element of visual flair to an otherwise quite utilitarian device. The back panel is very busy indeed – it offers balanced XLR outputs, as well as standard RCAs. One pair of optical

and one pair of coaxial digital inputs, plus a single asynchronous USB. Inside, there's a Cirrus Logic CS4398 Delta Sigma DAC with active oversampling filters. Signal paths are said to be 'ultra short' on multi-layer circuit boards and surface mount components. Power is supplied by a very modest-looking wall-wart type switched mode unit.

**It is great for attack transients, sounding very fast and highly expressive**

### Sound quality

In our blind listening test this DAC proves to be something of an enigma as in many ways, on some music, the panel rates it the best of the group by a good margin, yet on other music it seems to fall off the scale and sound nowhere near as convincing. It also divides opinion, as one of the three panel judges consistently marks it down a bit, while the other two rave about it.



### DETAILS

**PRODUCT**  
NAD D 1050

**PRICE**  
£399

**ORIGIN**  
US/China

**WEIGHT**  
1kg

**DIMENSIONS**  
(WxHxD)  
58 x 186 x 208mm

**FEATURES**  
• 32, 44.1, 48, 88.2, 96, 176.4 and 192kHz  
• 16, 24-bit  
• Asynchronous USB, 2x coaxial, 2x optical amplifier  
• Balanced XLR outputs

**DISTRIBUTOR**  
Sevenoaks Sound & Vision

**TELEPHONE**  
01793 461650

**WEBSITE**  
nadelectronics.com

**REVIEW DETAILS**  
*HFC* 379 Group Test

The D 1050 has a characteristically NAD sound, which is to say it has an apparently quite dark and velvety sort of tonality with a little bit of upper mid edge for good measure. One listener notes a lack of top-end sparkle to the high treble, making Beth Rowley's vocals sound a bit unatmospheric on *Little Dreamer*, while the piano is slightly processed and synthetic sounding compared to the rich sonorous Arcam irDAC (page 24). But still one panelist declares: "This is one of the best, I can hear her singing with the musicians, it is good with leading edges and extremely expressive". Another agrees it is great for attack transients, sounding very fast and expressive, adding it makes a compelling case for itself musically.

The third panelist isn't so impressed, saying that it just doesn't have the definition of some other models in the test, and lacks either's tonal balance. He admits it times well on guitar tracks, but suggests this could be down to it being a touch mid-forward. He comments that it does really rather badly on the Kraftwerk track, which is not what you'd expect from a DAC you'd previously thought "times well". Even the biggest fan of the DAC on the panel agrees: "It makes a complete horlicks of Kraftwerk"! It's a very 'Marmite' product and two people love it while one is left out in the cold. More than any other DAC, this is something you'll really need to try before you buy. **DP**

## Hi-Fi Choice

### OUR VERDICT

#### SOUND QUALITY

★★★★★

**LIKE:** Highly musically expressive, rhythmic sonics; styling

#### VALUE FOR MONEY

★★★★★

**DISLIKE:** A little too music-dependent means that's it not to everyone's tastes

#### BUILD QUALITY

★★★★★

**WE SAY:** Excellent sounding DAC, but style and sound aren't unanimously liked

#### FEATURES

★★★★★

#### OVERALL

★★★★★



# Naim DAC-V1

**T**he Naim DAC-V1 is the Salisbury company's latest attempt to make computer audio accessible to everyone. Essentially, it packages much of the technology that we've seen on the very capable (and expensive) Naim DAC, adds a bit more and then crams it all into a rather nice little 'half-width' box complete with a decent display to tell you what it's up to.

The DAC isn't just a digital convertor, as it has a volume control too. Inside, a Burr Brown PCM1791A 24-bit/748kHz stereo voltage output DAC chip (as seen inside the NDX and SuperUniti) is found, with custom-designed digital filtering with Naim-authored code, giving 16 times oversampling. The latter is done on a SHARC ADSP21489 DSP along with a RAM buffer, and following this the analogue signal goes to a discrete Naim preamplifier gain stage using selected passive components. It will work up to 24-bit, 384kHz resolution via USB, which itself is asynchronous so the Naim DAC-V1 provides the clock lock.

## Sound quality

There's no mistaking what you're listening to. Like many fine brands, Naim Audio has its own distinctive character to the way it goes about making music, which doesn't seem to change much regardless of the product. This is pure twenty-first century Naim, which is to say it's clean, tidy, tonally smooth – dark even – but grippy, rhythmic and dynamic, too. What you don't get is a

rich, fat, bloated sort of sound, but neither is it thin and reedy, with detail etched on your cranium.

Kicking off with some standard 16/44 silver disc action from a Cyrus transport plugged into the DAC via coaxial digital, and Corduroy's *London England* is riotously good fun. This early nineties Acid Jazz recording is lovely, late-period analogue and the Naim is incisive enough to throw out every detail of the recording, yet refined enough to capture its innate smoothness. Bass drum is beautifully taut with that characteristic Naim 'on-off' sort of envelope, snares, meanwhile, are penetrating and hard, but not spitty while hi-hats are crisp and detailed, but with feathery smoothness – a quality that earlier vintage Naim kit did not possess.

Switching to USB and ramping up the resolution, the Naim really sings with a 24/192 rendering of REM's plaintive *Texarkana* via an Audirvana-equipped MacBook Pro. It really lets Peter Buck's Rickenbackers ring out joyously. In front of this is a sweet sounding Mike Mills singing his heart out – and some lovely, pacey drum kit work set behind. It is so easy to pull individual strands out of the mix, yet the whole song coheres so well together. In every respect, from the excellent depth perspective to the crunchingly strong bass guitar work, it is a pleasure to listen to.

Serving up some super-sounding strings on a 24/88.2 file of Isaac Hayes' *Early Sunday Morning* from his beautiful *Shaft* soundtrack album, it reveals some of the nicest sounding

violin and trumpet work ever committed to tape. At the same time, I love the ultra explicit location of instruments in the mix, and the great sense of space. This DAC is tight enough to let the original recording push out into your room in proper proportion, yet never stifle it.

I find myself saying this with depressing regularity these days ('twas not always the way), but this is another masterful showing from Naim. It takes the good bits from the pricier Naim DAC, adds an excellent asynchronous USB implementation and a volume control and the result is a sound that's good enough to let rip into most speakers. Partner it with Naim's NAP 100 amplifier and you'll be rewarded with a package that's greater even than the sum of the parts – and brilliant value too. Just like it was planned all along, it makes computer audio easy and accessible, will play back your disc collection via a CD transport and doesn't take over your listening room either. My only regret with the DAC-V1 is that it doesn't have a single analogue line input to plug a turntable in, but I suppose that's just being greedy! **DP**

## DETAILS

**PRODUCT**  
Naim DAC-V1

**PRICE**  
£1,250

**ORIGIN**  
UK

**WEIGHT**  
4.3kg

**DIMENSIONS**  
(WxHxD)  
207 x 87 x 314mm

## FEATURES

- Burr Brown PCM1791A 24-bit/748kHz chip
- Asynchronous USB
- OLED display

**DISTRIBUTOR**  
Naim Audio Ltd

**TELEPHONE**  
01722 426600

**WEBSITE**  
naimaudio.com

**REVIEWED**  
HFC 371

## Hi-Fi Choice

### OUR VERDICT

#### SOUND QUALITY

★★★★★

#### VALUE FOR MONEY

★★★★★

#### BUILD QUALITY

★★★★★

#### FEATURES

★★★★★

#### OVERALL

★★★★★

**LIKE:** Excellent sonics; packaging; compact size and fine build

**DISLIKE:** Would an analogue input be too much to ask for?

**WE SAY:** Super-sounding DAC that gives you easy access to hi-res music



# Parasound Zdac

**T**he specifications of the Zdac look impressive – highly impressive given its competitive price – and its features help it stand out alongside its burgeoning competition. It comes in two finishes – silver and black, with only the latter-coloured units being available with rack-mount options. The 24-bit/192kHz capable design features an asynchronous USB, optical and coaxial input along with a Class A headphone amplifier, and balanced and unbalanced line-level audio outputs. The design can run straight into a power amplifier if you so wish – provided your digital source component offers volume control.

In terms of audio outputs, the Zdac offers two varieties: balanced through XLR and unbalanced through phono. Both connections are simultaneously live so you can use one to feed your main hi-fi and the other to connect a multi-room controller if you so desire. There is, of course, also the headphone output through a front-panel 3.5mm jack, which features a volume control.

## Sound quality

I begin my listening by connecting the Zdac to my Windows 7 laptop opting not to use the USB cable that is supplied in the box, but a 3.5m Atlas Element USB. It swiftly becomes apparent that the Zdac benefits from a warm up, sounding more detailed and robust as the first few albums play to their conclusion. Track by track the presentation of the Zdac

become sweeter, fuller, more detailed and more musically rewarding, which is most important of all.

After having enjoyed another 24-hours worth of warm up voltage, the Zdac seems happier than it was the day before and its performance advances another stage, its sound becoming fuller, more powerful and cohesive. It becomes more believable and closer to reality: more analogue. In fact, the Zdac begins to creep closer toward my £2,000+ reference Naim DAC, which is no mean feat.

Listening to the agreeable tones of Bill Frisell's guitar playing *Mi Declaración*, I am impressed initially by the power and control in the low frequencies. It does not have the ruthlessly tight grip or propulsive power of my Naim, but it is none too far off, and doesn't sound at all lightweight nor bloated and soft, a trap that many other DACs fall into. It is also forthcoming about the detailing, tone and timbre of all the instrumentation featured – both strung and percussive. More importantly, it makes the track coherent and emphasises those elements within the playing that are of musical importance.

The real surprise is its performance as a headphone amplifier. Driving my Focal Spirit Ones and taking a digital input from my Naim UnitiQute, the Zdac gives a thoroughly entertaining performance – it's neutral, detailed, dynamic, rhythmically responsive and great fun. It also has a seemingly genuine full-range quality, not leaving

me with the usual cheated feeling I tend to have after a headphone listening session.

Switching to a rip of Emeli Sandé's *Our Version of Events*, her impassioned voice and equally committed piano playing are movingly conveyed. Even with a singer of Sandé's class it takes more than a sterling performance to prevent me from discarding the headphones as soon as I can. The Zdac, however, has me flicking through my library looking for yet another track to play.

I opt for Tchaikovsky – the relaxing *Allegro Tranquillo (Dreams of a Winter Journey)*, appreciating the way the Zdac scavenges a wealth of detail from the music (a 24-bit download) without making its scrupulous investigation appear anything but totally natural. It doesn't retrieve this information in such a way as to detract from the natural ebb and flow of the composition, but rather the detailing augments it.

Finally, I try out some jazz in the shape of the Buena Vista Social Club's album. Once again, this proves to be an absolute delight with the Zdac revelling in the timbre, tone and texture, and dynamics of the guitars, percussion, brass and voices. **MS**

## DETAILS

**PRODUCT**  
Parasound Zdac

**PRICE**  
£499

**ORIGIN**  
Taiwan

**WEIGHT**  
2.3kg

**DIMENSIONS**  
(WxHxD)  
220 x 51 x 254mm

**FEATURES**  
• Asynchronous USB  
• Optical and coaxial inputs  
• Class A headphone amplifier  
• Balanced and unbalanced line-level audio outputs

**DISTRIBUTOR**  
S-AV Distribution

**TELEPHONE**  
0843 2897195

**WEBSITE**  
parasound.com

**REVIEWED**  
HFC 370

## Hi-Fi Choice

### OUR VERDICT

#### SOUND QUALITY

★★★★★

#### VALUE FOR MONEY

★★★★★

#### BUILD QUALITY

★★★★★

#### FEATURES

★★★★★

#### OVERALL

★★★★★

**LIKE:** Persuasive, musically empathetic performance

**DISLIKE:** It would be better if the USB input were on the front

**WE SAY:** A musical performance that leaves little to be desired and its price is an absolute steal





# AudioQuest Dragonfly

**THE DRAGONFLY COULD** easily be confused with a USB stick, yet it's a 24-bit/96kHz asynchronous device that has onboard analogue volume control – features that you usually expect to have to pay considerably more for.

The Dragonfly can convert signals at up to 96kHz, but while some software players automatically change sample rate to match the native rate of the music being played some don't. iTunes is one of the latter and AQ recommends leaving it set at 44.1kHz in those instances.

It has a 24-bit ESS Sabre convertor chip, but the key to its potential is the asynchronous operation, this means that the clocking is done by the DAC not the computer and is a sure fire means of reducing jitter. Two onboard clocks are designed to minimise the amount of processing that the convertor has to do for the benefit of the analogue output. This can deliver a maximum of 2V, as

much as full-size audio components and thus is more than sufficient for long cable runs or use with low sensitivity headphones.

## Sound quality

I use an AudioQuest Big Sur interconnect (a £75 cable), and enjoy some very entertaining results. The Dragonfly is extremely clean, which can make it sound soft, but also means you can turn up the volume without fear of digital glare. It also takes the edginess away from lower quality formats like low bit-rate MP3 and makes them more palatable in a revealing system.

Next to a Cambridge Audio DacMagic Plus it is not as open nor obviously transparent, but more relaxed and produces rather more convincing sound-stages. Timing is the only area where the DM+ has a clear advantage. It also delivers powerful results with decent material, Laura Marling's *Alpha Shallows*

provokes a strong emotional response thanks to the way Marling is placed in the room in such a tangible fashion.

This neat little DAC does a superb job with both hi- and low-res files, it's onboard volume control is not great, but that's not a big deal in a system context where it can deliver the three-dimensional drama of a good recording in a very realistic fashion. And while it's not a headphone amp in the traditional sense it functions like a rather good and extremely portable example of one. **JK**



## DETAILS

**PRICE**  
£215

**CONTACT**  
01249 848873

**WEBSITE**  
audioquest.com

**REVIEWED**  
HFC 370

## OUR VERDICT

★★★★★

# Meridian Explorer



## DETAILS

**PRICE**  
£250

**CONTACT**  
01480 445678

**WEBSITE**  
meridian-audio.com

**REVIEWED**  
HFC 377

## OUR VERDICT

★★★★★

**THE MERIDIAN EXPLORER** is an external DAC aimed at delivering superior sonics from a laptop or a desktop computer. It works by using asynchronous USB clocks, which are of a higher quality than those built into most computers, resulting in less jitter. It's other vital attribute is that it can handle native hi-res audio files up to 24-bit/192kHz, which are starting to become increasingly popular. Since most computer soundcards have to

down-sample 192kHz to 96kHz or 48kHz, this makes the Explorer a natural fit for delivering maximum audio enjoyment from hi-res files.

## Sound quality

Using an iMac with a set of Philips Fidelio L1 headphones and starting with a 24/192 download of Claire Martin and Richard Rodney Bennett's sumptuous version of *I'm Gonna Laugh You Right Out of My Life*, the Explorer shows just how good computer-based audio can be. You feel that nothing is compromised as you are treated to a spine-tingling emotional roller coaster with all the presence and vitality of a live show. More heavily textured 24/192 material such as Beethoven's *Piano Concerto No.5 in E flat major* is equally compelling. The piano glides along, teasing out the strings and wind instruments, building to fully orchestrated peaks. The maximum bandwidth and absence of

compression brings out the best of each element of the piece. It's a joyful listen, that never becomes tiring or a strain, despite the great energy and changes of pace.

An Apple Lossless Audio Codec download of Emily Barker singing *Nostalgia* in hi-res 24/96 is gritty and raw, yet delicately delivered as the low accordion introduction blends with the gently picked guitar notes. Barker's soulful vocals transport you to a bleak and sodden tramline in Melbourne.

With 16-bit/44.1 material the Explorer is tight, balanced and polished. It can't perform miracles, an MP3 of *Motorcycle Emptiness* (Manic Street Preachers) still feels clipped and lacks detail, although Thom Yorke's haunting vocals are certainly optimised in an AAC rip of Radiohead's *Fake Plastic Trees*. You'll be hard pressed to find anything offering the same levels of performance for the money. **AJ**





# Cambridge Audio Aero 2

Here's a brand new small standmount speaker with a difference; something that's not apparent from just looking at it

**I**n the vast majority of loudspeakers we buy, a mid/bass driver will take care of the sound from about 50Hz upwards to 2kHz or so, when a crossover will bring in a dome tweeter that goes up to 20kHz or beyond. That's why the new Aero 2 is so interesting – it doesn't do this!

Look above the woofer to the upper drive unit. Where you'd normally see a small dome tweeter and there's a Balanced Mode Radiator fitted. The BMR design came from NXT technology developed in the nineties. Various NXT panels have appeared on

loudspeakers, but the BMR spin-off has recently grown legs, thanks to the design's very broad dispersion and bandwidth capabilities. Basically, for a given size, the driver can throw out a wider range of sound across larger parts of a room than conventional cones or domes. They've proved their worth in all sorts of applications, so why not in a standmount speaker?

The Aero does just this – running a 46mm BMR with a conventional 165mm paper cone bass unit. Notice that I didn't say 'mid/bass' here; if it was any other loudspeaker at this price, I would have done. But the

## DETAILS

**PRODUCT**  
Cambridge Audio Aero 2

**PRICE**  
£350

**ORIGIN**  
UK/China

**WEIGHT**  
6.8kg

**DIMENSIONS**  
(WxHxD)  
203 x 70 x 311mm

### FEATURES

- 1x 46mm BMR treble/mid driver
- 1x 165mm paper bass driver
- Quoted power handling: 25-120W
- Quoted sensitivity: 90dB/1W/1m
- Quoted frequency response: 40Hz-22kHz (+/- 3dB)

**DISTRIBUTOR**  
Cambridge Audio

**WEBSITE**  
cambridgeaudio.com

**REVIEWED**  
HFC 377

Aero doesn't have a mid/bass driver, as the midrange is taken care of by the BMR. Here's the clever bit – by opting for a BMR the designer can use one single drive unit for all frequencies from 250Hz upwards, with the bass driver handling everything below. Contrast that to a conventional speaker, where the larger driver runs from 50Hz or so to 2kHz, and then the tweeter takes over. The difference is that the crossover frequency on the Aero is way lower than any conventional speaker using a dome tweeter – which means that it is far further away from the ultra-critical midband, where the ear can hear any change of phase or spike or dip in response far more clearly than it can higher up or lower down.

The genius of the Aero then is that it sidesteps the problem of putting the crossover where the ear is most sensitive. The result is that you get a bass driver optimised for being a bass driver, and a BMR that gives you a wide expanse of sound from upper bass to high treble – without any crossover in the way where the ear can hear it most. Oh, and there's more – because the BMR creates a lot

of its sound from surface vibration as well as traditional in-out pistonic motion, it diffuses around the room better and doesn't have such a pronounced sweet spot. Clever, eh?

The Aero's drivers are, of course, bespoke; the BMR is the very latest fourth-generation unit – which designer Dominic Baker says is newer than the BMRs in any other commercially available loudspeaker on sale, some of which are still running first-gen designs. It is British designed and bespoke manufactured in China, at Cambridge Audio's facility. The bass driver is too, and uses paper for its cone material as the designer thinks it's still one of the stiffest materials relative to weight around – and a light, but strong cone is just what's wanted to give accurate air-moving ability.

In direct contrast to all the clever stuff that's going on, the cabinets are pretty anodyne-looking budget boxes, although they're heavier and better built than they look. The designer believes that using fancy swoopy sides – beloved by many rivals – is more about styling than sonics, and says that it can actually create problems. That's why the Aero gets a well-damped MDF box with a single largish reflex port on the front baffle; there's a choice of black or dark walnut finishes. No biwiring option is offered – again Dominic Baker believes the cost/benefit ratio of biwiring your system isn't as good as throwing the same amount of upgrade cash at better-quality cable, rather than more of the same.

**An exotic little speaker that's not built in the same way as rival offerings**



## Sound quality

The second you set ears on the Aero 2s, you realise that you're listening to something that's radically different from its rivals. This little loudspeaker has in some ways an amazing sound, offering the sort of dispersion and evenness across the midband and treble that you'd normally only get from an electrostatic. It's an eerie feeling of the music gelling together in an organic way, rather than being forced out of two differing sized toothpaste tubes – and it's really quite lovely.

For example, play some smooth, classic funk in the shape of Chic's *Freak Out*, and what you'd normally expect from a speaker at this price is an edgy sort of 'boom tizz' sound, with the bass guitar thumping, the cymbals crashing and those female vocals honking out at you. Try this on the Aeros, however, and you get a far more even, balanced and subtle performance, completely devoid of

## It is couth, balanced and effortlessly musical; devoid of pain or grain

the sound of loudspeaker drive units struggling to keep abreast of events. The midband and treble are so smooth that you can listen right into the mix, while the bass bounces around with energy and ease, beautifully integrated with the rest of the action. Many people – this reviewer included – love this sort of thing, as it is totally unexpected from a pair of £350 speakers; indeed in some ways it is closer to the svelte performance you'd expect from a big 2.5-way design of a high-end floorstanding speaker. It is couth, balanced and effortlessly musical; devoid of pain or grain.

However, those used to the spectacle of kicking, crashing and banging budget boxes will be disappointed – they'll accuse the Aero of being too polite, of not having enough bite. And they'll say it is 'boring' because it doesn't 'kick ass'. Listen carefully, however, and it does – as the 6in driver in the Aero shifts a good deal more air than most 4in-equipped rivals like the Q Acoustics Concept 20. It shows itself better able to withstand the rigours of powerful modern music such as Kanye West's *Say You Will*. Even in a medium to largish listening room, you can really feel the electronic

percussion hit home. There's a fine sense of solidity, plus the ability to go louder with less compression apparent. The thing is, though, that there's no big, lumpy peak around 100Hz that gives so many small standmounts an apparently big, bassy showroom sound (along with the one-note bass to match). Instead, the Aero 2's low end is smooth and devoid of trickery.

The quality of the treble is excellent; Genesis's *Robbery, Assault and Battery* has some lovely hi-hat and ride cymbal work and the Aero 2 shows how smooth and delicate it can be; there's no sense of grain or coarseness from the BMR, and it spreads out around the room beautifully. However, sometimes a little extra bite would be nice; it's almost as if the unit is over smooth and it almost doesn't seem right on a budget speaker whose first job is to entertain. It's an odd remark to make perhaps, but certainly with subtle high-quality front ends this speaker can almost sound that little bit too refined with thumping rock music.

It's a different matter with classical, of course, where the Aero soars. It delivers a large-scale sound on the Berlin Philharmonic's rendition of Beethoven's *Pastoral Symphony*, with an accurately rendered orchestra floating in space. Violins are amazing to behold, as they're right where normal two-way speakers crossover, yet with these you get a wonderfully balanced and phase-coherent sense; they hang in the recorded acoustic with total assuredness, and sound raw and realistic yet never grate. Lower down, cellos grumble menacingly, yet these speakers seem to have plenty in reserve when the music reaches a crescendo; I've heard many pricier designs sit on transients and compress things much more. Overall, you get a refined and natural sound that's completely unexpected at the price. **DP**

## Hi-Fi Choice

### OUR VERDICT

#### SOUND QUALITY

★★★★★

**LIKE:** Superbly smooth, open, seamless sound; musicality

#### VALUE FOR MONEY

★★★★★

**DISLIKE:** Looks are a little on the bland side, but that's it at the price

#### BUILD QUALITY

★★★★★

**WE SAY:** Brilliant small standmount engineered for stunning sonics

#### EASE OF DRIVE

★★★★★

#### OVERALL

★★★★★



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# Eclipse TD510ZMK2

**E**clipse TD's loudspeakers are all egg shaped because this is the most effective way of making the sound of a speaker cabinet disappear, claims the company. And it not only gives a cleaner and more transparent tonality, but works wonders with transients, too. Indeed, the latter is mission-critical for Eclipse TD – 'TD' stands for 'Time Domain', and producing a phase-coherent speaker that captures the blistering transient speed of real music is the company's avowed goal.

To this end, the TD510ZMK2's enclosure is made from steel, zinc, aluminium and composites. No two radial surfaces are in the same plane, which reduces the potential for resonance and time-smear. Set into this is a single 'full-range' 100mm fibreglass-coned driver, which gives a poor (quoted) frequency response of 42Hz-22kHz at -10dB. Eclipse TD's designs are configured to optimise performance in the time domain, rather than the frequency domain and this is absolutely key to understanding this product.

## Sound quality

Okay, it's cards on the table time. Just as a single, small drive unit in a compact, infinite baffle enclosure is never going to light up the frequency extremes, nor is it going to produce high levels of sound from a puny amount of power. Quite the reverse, in fact – Eclipse TD claims a sensitivity figure of 84dB/W/1m for the 510Z, which is very low. In practice this speaker needs a powerful transistor amplifier of at least 50W per side, and even then don't expect it to fill big rooms with swathes of floor-shaking sound.

However, properly positioned, aligned, angled and aspirated, the Eclipse TD510ZMK2 is capable of something special. It delivers an auditory experience the like of which one almost never hears – for better and for worse. If you want a speaker to rock you physically, or beguile you with its sugary sweet sonics, then best turn the page now!

On a superficial level, as soon as you set ears on this speaker, you'll be disappointed. The reassuring, familiar

upper bass 'thrum' of a box cabinet is gone. This – the audio equivalent of a thick pre-packaged supermarket bread that fills you up, but doesn't actually nourish – is nowhere to be heard. Instead, listening to the Eclipse TDs is like switching to a gluten-free diet, there's less stodge to swell the sound and as soon as you're used to it, it's hard to go back. There's a menu of other delights to feast upon...

Cue up electronica like Plant Life's *When She Smiles*, and from the very first strike of the snare drum you're in another world. The speed with which the stick hits the skin is blistering, and the way the drum sound decays is mesmerizing. Instead of just fading out into a grey gloop, it lingers and sustains. Meanwhile the next beat is being struck, and you're gripped. The backing synth pads kick in and they seem eerily separate from the drums in time and space, and the vocals hover metres above the rest of the soundstage. The keyboards start and suddenly the song is gliding along in an ethereal, otherworldly way. The Eclipse TDs give a profoundly different listening experience, where the music's rhythms become the mainstay, and from this all else follows...

The result is quite transfixing, but still not necessarily for everyone, I'd suggest. The bassline is a little lighter than it should be – even if it does stop, start and play tunes with amazing fluency. Hi hat cymbals lack the extension you'd expect to hear from a decent dome tweeter and nor is it as sweet and subtle.

The Eclipse TD510ZMK2 is not a consummate all rounder, as it does too many things in a distinctly underwhelming way. Still, it is uniquely able to chart a course direct to the heart of the music, giving you a unique window into its (and even your) very soul. If this, above all else, is what you crave, then it is an absolutely essential audition. **DP**

## DETAILS

**PRODUCT**  
Eclipse TD510ZMK2

**PRICE**  
£3,840

**ORIGIN**  
Japan

**WEIGHT**  
19.5kg

**DIMENSIONS**  
(WxHxD)  
384 x 978 x 393mm

**FEATURES**  
• 100mm fibre glass full-range driver  
• Steel, zinc, aluminium and composite cabinet  
• Stands with angle adjustment  
• 6 ohm quoted impedance

**DISTRIBUTOR**  
Eclipse TD

**TELEPHONE**  
020 73284499

**WEBSITE**  
eclipse-td.net

**REVIEWED**  
HFC 367

## Hi-Fi Choice

### OUR VERDICT

#### SOUND QUALITY

★★★★★

#### VALUE FOR MONEY

★★★★★

#### BUILD QUALITY

★★★★★

#### EASE OF DRIVE

★★★★★

#### OVERALL

★★★★★

**LIKE:** Breathtaking transients; superlative timing; great dynamics; detailing; soundstaging

**DISLIKE:** Limited frequency extremes

**WE SAY:** You'll either love it or hate it, but you owe it to yourself to hear it



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# Epos Elan 10

**T**he Elan 10 enclosure looks exceptionally clean with its 18mm internally braced panels and an audiophile baffle upon which there are no visible fixing screws, grille-fixing holes or cloth. The driver array consists of two units: a 25mm, soft dome tweeter and a polypropylene-coned, 156mm, mid-bass driver. Round the back of the cabinet there is the exit of the reflex port along with two pairs of 4mm binding posts for bi-wiring.

## Sound quality

The baby Epos truly shines playing *I Heard It Through The Grapevine* from Bill Frisell. It portrays his guitar tone in all its vivid Kodachrome hues and pungently contrasts its dynamics. It further gives a distinctly credible account of the bass guitar. Even though it can't physically generate the low fundamentals, the bass line is consistent, tuneful and persuasive. The drum kit is represented plausibly even if the speakers can't manage the full weight of a floor-tom strike or the heft of the kick-drum. What is present, though, gets the message across effectively. Much of the Elan's ability to communicate fluently seems to be a result of its speed and its accurate portrayal of leading edges.

The Elan renders the guitars beautifully on Caitlin Rose's *Shanghai Cigarettes*, perfectly capturing the

single pick-up, country twang of the dominant Fender Telecaster. The speaker also performs admirably conveying Rose's vocal dexterity and power. Furthermore, it appears very comfortably balanced on this rather mid-prominent mix, and resists sounding markedly mid-forward – as some speakers can – with its robust rendering of the near frequency extremes affording the track a pleasingly robust character.

The Elan has an inviting sound – one that encourages the listener to pay scrupulously close attention to the music. It draws you in – emotionally and in an academic sense: I appreciate what has been played and then replay it to hear exactly how the music has been performed and phrased.

The Epos capably demonstrates its communicative prowess with rips on the exceptional Amy Winehouse *Lioness: Hidden Treasures* collection. Not only is its revealing nature and transparency rewarding in uncovering what is going on in the musical arrangements, but the insight it gives into Winehouse and her vocal performance is quite outstanding. The speaker is similarly forthcoming on Marianne Faithfull's *The Crane Wife #3* and other selections from her *Easy Come, Easy Go* album. It is fascinating to hear how skillfully she weaves her vocal line around those of the

instruments backing her, perfectly adjusting her phrasing and dynamics to suit. The Elan, furthermore, gives a fine account of the variety of vibrant tonal colour and texture her musicians produced.

To assure myself that the Epos is not only suited to rock and jazz music, I play Mercedes Sosa's *Misa Criolla* and began listening with *Kyrie*. It is hard for a speaker of this size to create the dramatic scale this music demands, but the Epos fares well, especially with its portrayal of the weight of choir and orchestral percussion. I then play the José Carreras' version of this work, which I prefer to the others I own, and this confirms that while the speaker makes a brave attempt at generating a credible soundstage, it can't match the finest free-standing designs for front-to-back depth and image height/specificity. Nor is it as especially convincing in creating a sense of Carreras and the choir being in a clearly defined acoustic space. The image seems somewhat condensed and vague.

A 24-bit recording of the LSO playing Debussy comes across a little better in terms of staging, but the depth perspective is not a strong point of the Epos presentation. Musically it is more persuasive than it is in conveying hi-fi aspects of the performance. For this reason I consider the Elan better suited to rock and jazz music than it is to the classical selections I audition.

Similarly the speaker is just as informative about the guitar and piano, being effortlessly detailed and dynamic while managing to convey the music's flow and power quite fluently. The Elan does not exhibit the greatest weight or substance at the lower end of the frequency spectrum, but it dexterously avoids appearing lightweight or 'thin'. Ultimately, it's a thoroughly enjoyable and plausible performer, especially if your tastes lean towards contemporary music. **MS**

## DETAILS

**PRODUCT**  
Epos Elan 10

**PRICE**  
£499

**ORIGIN**  
UK

**WEIGHT**  
8.8kg

**DIMENSIONS**  
(WxHxD)  
185 x 320 x 245mm

**FEATURES**  
● Impedance:  
4 ohms nominal  
● Frequency range:  
51Hz–25kHz  
● 25mm soft  
dome tweeter  
● 156mm  
Polypropylene cone  
bass midrange

**DISTRIBUTOR**  
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**TELEPHONE**  
01442 260146

**WEBSITE**  
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**REVIEWED**  
HFC 375

## Hi-Fi Choice

### OUR VERDICT

**SOUND QUALITY**

★★★★★

**VALUE FOR MONEY**

★★★★★

**BUILD QUALITY**

★★★★★

**EASE OF DRIVE**

★★★★★

**OVERALL**

★★★★★

**LIKE:** Musically fluent and convincing

**DISLIKE:** There is little to dislike unless the shortage of stereo depth offends

**WE SAY:** Vital and animated, its musical character and agility suits contemporary music perfectly





## Stream Box DSA

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 /HenleyDesigns1



# Guru Audio Junior

**T**here are far too many two-way loudspeakers on the market, yet somehow Swedish company Guru Audio has managed to carve itself a niche. It did this primarily with the QM10, now QM10two, a decidedly different two-way with a squat round cornered cabinet and a style all of its own. In many respects the Junior is a QM10two without the expensive bits, the main one being the cabinet, which is made in the Far East rather than Scandinavia. The drive units are very similar, in fact the tweeter is the same as a QM10two and the main driver comes from the first iteration of the QM10 with a more basic cone.

Junior is a very stylish speaker, the piano black sample shown is perhaps the most conservative finish, it looks very slick but I prefer the combination of silver grey aluminium around the drivers and a walnut wood veneer on the carcass. That anodised metal skin is also on the back panel where there's a single pair of 4mm plug sockets, which makes for a flush rear end. This helps when siting the speaker in the recommended position on or very near the wall. The slot port means that this speaker is eminently suited to wall mounting, Guru even suggests putting it on a bookshelf. The aim is very clearly to produce a speaker that everyone can accommodate in their home.

Unlike most speaker makers, Guru is not into spikes and Blu-Tack, rather it fits foam pucks to the underside of its speakers so that the supporting surface is not energised by vibrations from the cabinet. The Junior, therefore, requires a stand with a top plate that's nearly as big as its 18 x 23cm footprint – Guru is producing one for the purpose.

## Sound quality

The preferred position for Junior is against the wall and toed-in just enough so that you can see the outside flank of each speaker from the listening position. Guru recommends not only a bit of damping on the inside of each speaker, curtains for instance, but also that you put a coffee table in front of the listening seat on which to rest your feet on. Now that's my kind of set-up instruction!

And this is my kind of speaker, relaxed, revealing and musically irresistible. Junior is not the most explicit of speakers at its price point, but it's certainly one of the most enjoyable, this is because it is very nicely balanced and extremely coherent. Timing is spot on and that always draws you into the music whatever variety that might be. I get carried away with Frank Zappa's *Apostrophe* album where the playing is superb and the songwriting rather

more colourful than usual. Both these factors are abundantly clear with this speaker, in fact it seems to excel with fast and dense material, or at least that is my initial thought, but further listening makes it apparent that it excels at putting the music ahead of the sound.

This is the same skill that you find in the QM10two, so it shouldn't be a surprise but it's a rare quality, one that only a few brands seem to have mastered, Rega comes to mind.

Junior does not, however, sound like a Rega speaker; its wall positioning means that it reaches far lower in the bass than most compact speakers, let alone Rega's slightly lean variety.

I am consistently impressed with the extension and smoothness of the lower registers. There is a tendency with this pursuit of ours to listen to tracks rather than albums, to play the well-known pieces in order to appraise a component. But Junior is having none of that, if an album is worth listening to you won't be happy just playing the standout tracks because you need to hear the next one and the one after that. This musical focus means that this speaker is not as analytical as some, but it's highly revealing of character in the playing and recording, every album sounds different and every musician reveals his or her skill.

Whether you love Miles' trumpet or Jimi's guitar, you will discover precisely what makes them unique with this remarkable speaker. It will appeal to music lovers more than audiophiles for this reason, it does imaging surprisingly well for a standmount and bass extension is also strong, but it's not really about that. It's about the emotional communication that only music can achieve, it focuses on what counts so well that a good album is hard to put down. So banish your playlists and listen to your classic albums as they were intended to be heard. **JK**

## DETAILS

**PRODUCT**  
Guru Audio Junior

**PRICE**  
£795

**ORIGIN**  
Sweden

**WEIGHT**  
4kg

**DIMENSIONS**  
(WxHxD)  
180 x 290 x 230mm

**FEATURES**  
• Quoted sensitivity  
87dB (@2.83V, 1m)  
• Quoted nominal  
impedance: 6 ohms  
• Enclosure  
material: MDF/  
aluminium  
• HF driver: 20.5mm  
soft dome  
• LF driver: 102mm  
coated paper cone

**DISTRIBUTOR**  
The Sound Practice

**TELEPHONE**  
01727 858589

**WEBSITE**  
guruaudio.co.uk

**REVIEWED**  
HFC 370

## Hi-Fi Choice

### OUR VERDICT

#### SOUND QUALITY

★★★★★

**LIKE:** Well balanced, very coherent and uncannily musical

#### VALUE FOR MONEY

★★★★★

**DISLIKE:** Needs a bit more power than average

#### BUILD QUALITY

★★★★★

**WE SAY:** Musically engaging thanks to excellent timing, good bandwidth and a clean revealing balance

#### EASE OF DRIVE

★★★★★

### OVERALL

★★★★★



## LOUDSPEAKER



# KEF R300

**T**he R300 sports a main driver made up of a 125mm aluminium coned midrange driver with a centrally located 25mm aluminium dome tweeter, in KEF's trademark Uni-Q point-source configuration. Crossover between the two units is at a respectably high 2.8kHz and the tweeter features the recently developed 'Tangerine' waveguide to aid in the dispersal of its output.

Below the Uni-Q driver sits a 165mm bass driver with aluminium cone and aluminium-wired voice coil; both items ensuring low weight and good responsiveness.

Twin sets of terminals are provided for bi-wiring or bi-amping the Uni-Q driver and the bass unit separately, and the links are built into the speaker – twist a knob between each pair of positive and negative terminals anticlockwise and they are disconnected, twist clockwise and they reconnect – clever, huh?

### Sound quality

From the very beginning I am impressed by the sheer scale of the

R300s and the magnificent sense of authority they impart onto the music. They offer a larger-than-life take on things, particularly given their compact cabinet size, and have impressive low-end heft.

Inserting a pair of foam bungs to limit port output improves things immeasurably and the R300s really come alive. Bass is still very fulsome, but much better controlled and superbly tuneful. All too often, tuning for impressive bass weight can leave detail and taut rhythmicity behind in the wings, but I am pleased to hear that they do not suffer from this in any way.

The solo fretless bass guitar from Paul Simon's *Diamonds on the Soles of her Shoes* is magnificently rendered, with real pace, depth and form to the performance. There is no sense of overhang, wallow or cabinet artefacts and each note is distinctly audible within the song as it was played. Even better are the vocals, though – Simon is absolutely rock-solid in the centre of the loudspeakers, and his performance is vivid, emotive and superbly three dimensional.

### DETAILS

**PRODUCT**  
KEF R300  
**PRICE**  
£1,000  
**ORIGIN**  
UK/China  
**WEIGHT**  
12kg  
**DIMENSIONS**  
(WxHxD mm):  
210 x 385 x 345mm  
**FEATURES**  
• Specified sensitivity: 88dB  
• Specified impedance: 8 ohm  
• 25mm aluminium dome tweeter and 125 aluminium midrange unit  
• 165mm aluminium coned bass driver  
**DISTRIBUTOR**  
KEF Audio  
**TELEPHONE**  
01622 672261  
**WEBSITE**  
kef.com  
**REVIEWED**  
HFC 367

The result is that the wee R300s image very well indeed and set up a capacious soundstage across the width of my listening room; a soundstage that is so secure and sculpted and makes instrument placement easy.

A perfect example is when I slip an old test favourite, the Eagles' *Hell Freezes Over* onto the turntable – the way in which the R300s spread Messrs Henley, Schmit, Frey, Walsh and Felder across the end of the room is quite uncanny, and they project them forward at me by just the right amount. This is tricky to get right – if a loudspeaker pushes things back off into the distance too much it can be like listening down a tunnel, but equally too much forward projection can make you feel like you're being shouted at by an irate sergeant major! The KEFs manage to judge everything beautifully, putting the action right where it needs to be. They gently push backing instruments away to the end of my listening room, while layering the main action expertly in front of them.

At all times there is a highly pleasing sense of coherence across the midband and treble that allows singers and musicians to express themselves well with no hint of any uncertainty or muddle slipping through the net. Acoustic instruments such as guitars, cellos and double basses have a lovely sense of woody richness and depth to them.

A further aspect I enjoy greatly is the trebles, which are as sweet and smooth, yet as blissfully detailed, as I have heard from anything at the price. Where some designs can impress with their clarity but then start to become aggressive when provoked, I never find the R300s lose their sense of composure, even when faced with a less than couth recording. They face some worthy competition at their price point, but are well worth an audition. **AS**

## Hi-Fi Choice

### OUR VERDICT

#### SOUND QUALITY

★★★★★

#### VALUE FOR MONEY

★★★★★

#### BUILD QUALITY

★★★★★

#### EASE OF DRIVE

★★★★★

#### OVERALL

★★★★★

**LIKE:** Superb imaging and soundstaging; sweet treble

**DISLIKE:** Bass can be overblown; needs taut, powerful transistor amplifier

**WE SAY:** Highly capable standmounter with a superbly spacious sound





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**The result is nothing short of sensational.**

For the very best results the Concept 20 should be used on its unique dedicated speaker stand, which uses the same Gelcore™ construction technique.



Hi-Fi Choice, Editors  
Choice, June 2013



What Hi-Fi? Sound and Vision,  
Group Test Winner, June 2013



AV Forums,  
April 2013



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# Monitor Audio Radius 90

**M**onitor Audio's Radius 90 is designed for those that crave a light and airy sort of sound that focuses more on finesse than it does on visceral, flare-flapping volume, and it is one of the smallest loudspeakers around. But while that has obvious consequences for bass extension, it has real positives, too. Being so small, it will go down no further than the claimed 80Hz, and so won't set off the resonant modes in your room.

Also its mid/bass unit is so tiny that it can be mounted really close to the tweeter. This is an advantage that speakers with bigger drivers can never enjoy; the two drive units appear much closer to the ideal of a 'point source'; when listening to them you get the sense of them working well together in both the time domain and in terms of stereo imaging.

Quoted sensitivity is a poor 83dB, so you'll need a punchy solid-state amplifier, putting out at least 40W RMS per channel if you want to produce realistic volume levels.

## Sound quality

Those unfamiliar with the Radius 90 who come into a room with a pair of them playing will often do two

things; first they'll remark on how tiny they are, and then they'll ask, "But where are the main speakers?". This shows how they're able to make a sound that is almost TARDIS-like – one that totally defies their physical dimensions. They can fool the ear, leaving the listener questioning the evidence that their eyes are giving them. One reason for this is the solidity and speed and articulation of the bass; given a little rear-wall reinforcement, it comes out of its shell and shows itself to be amazingly lithe and communicative. You'll marvel at the way Bernard Edwards' breathtaking bass guitar work modulates up and down on Chic's *My Forbidden Lover*, for instance. Better still, the long-throw mid/bass driver soaks up quite a lot of punishment before it begins to compress things; in a medium-sized listening room it goes louder, more cleanly than you'd think.

Played at high volume, Kate Bush's *Snowflake* is a stern test of a speaker, but the wee Monitor Audio acquires itself superbly, showing a richness and warmth that you might not expect from such a modest priced – and indeed sized – box. The two drive units segue between one another seamlessly, giving a lovely, natural

feel to female vocals; I'd say they're better integrated than before, as the old Radius 90HD had a slightly softer sound to its low frequency driver than the bright, spry tweeter. The result is a lovely, all-of-a-piece feel to the music, and it's not just tonally clean and smooth, but is also very good at keeping in phase – you don't get the sense that you're listening to two drive units doing their own thing, as you can on some equivalently priced designs. This means the new Radius projects beautifully, beaming vocals and instruments out of its box with laser-like precision.

The speed of this little speaker means that it's remarkably good at throwing you off the trail. You always know it's limited in terms of its bass reproduction, but somehow you just don't dwell on it. Teenage Fanclub's *What You Do To Me* is a fine slice of singalong indie rock, and via a big floorstander has a wonderful physicality courtesy of the energetic bass guitar and drum work. Yet play it through the Radius 90 and you find yourself drawn to the sweetness of the vocals and the raunchy, grungey guitar playing, plus the sweet, sparkly hi-hat work. Somehow, this speaker flatters to deceive, making the music riotously good fun, emotionally affecting and powerful even – but without actually moving the same amount of air as a larger, looser speaker. The result is a slightly different experience to that of a wider range design, but no less fun – indeed the rhythmic alacrity and ability to signpost dynamic contrasts in the music is on a higher level than almost all price rivals.

Those with smaller listening rooms and/or family members to keep sweet, will love this little box. Yes, it loses the bottom octave – or two – of the performance, but it makes up for it with a wonderfully fast and incisive sound everywhere else, and it's sophisticated and seamless, too. **DP**

## DETAILS

**PRODUCT**  
Monitor Audio  
Radius 90

**PRICE**  
£350

**ORIGIN**  
UK

**WEIGHT**  
2.1kg

**DIMENSIONS**  
(WxHxD)  
125 x 198 x 140mm

**FEATURES**  
• Quoted power handling: 100W  
• Quoted frequency response: 80Hz–35kHz (-6dB)  
• 1x 25mm C-CAM dome tweeter  
• 1x 100mm C-CAM bass driver

**DISTRIBUTOR**  
Monitor Audio Ltd

**TELEPHONE**  
01268 740580

**WEBSITE**  
monitoraudio.co.uk

**REVIEWED**  
HFC 378

## Hi-Fi Choice

### OUR VERDICT

#### SOUND QUALITY

★★★★★

#### VALUE FOR MONEY

★★★★★

#### BUILD QUALITY

★★★★★

#### EASE OF DRIVE

★★★★★

#### OVERALL

★★★★★

**LIKE:** Super-fast, fluid and fun; sophistication; size; soundstaging

**DISLIKE:** No low bass; needs a powerful solid-state amplifier

**WE SAY:** Exceptionally high performance from an extremely small speaker





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# Neat Motive 3

The Neat provides an impressive demonstration of all round ability that should suit many listeners

**N**eat speakers are the result of a protracted listening process with multiple recordings that takes precedent over engineering measurement. Broadly speaking, if it doesn't sound right, it doesn't matter how good the measurements are – it isn't going out the door.

The design pairs a 25mm inverted titanium tweeter with the trademark wide foam surround and a 134mm mid bass driver, both of which are customised to Neat's requirements. These are mounted in a well-damped cabinet that is rear-ported and supports bi-wiring.

## Sound quality

There's plenty to get excited about when you start listening to the Motive

3. OK, so it might be slightly less sensitive than the other speakers it came up against in our *May Group Test*, but not unduly so and it doesn't need a huge amount of power to reach the test level. Once there, the Motive 3 doesn't come out absolutely top in any particular area, but much more importantly, it's very strong across a wide variety of disciplines and this generates a performance that is extremely appealing.

With Max Richter's recomposed version of Vivaldi's *Spring*, the Neat manages to produce a large and cohesive soundstage that is packed full of detail, but also not overblown or forced. The placement of the instruments is intuitively 'right' and helps in the suspension of disbelief that you are listening to the real deal

and not a reproduction of it. The Neat also has an engaging and believable tonality. The rasp of Mark Knopfler's vocals on the 24/96 FLAC of *Privateering Privateering* alongside the movement of fingers across strings are entirely convincing and have a fantastic sense of decay to them. This vocal ability is equally apparent with Muse's *Panic Station* (24/96 FLAC), and this unforced, realistic and involving tonal ability gives the Motive 3 an appeal with a wide variety of music. The sonic balance suggests that this is a hard speaker to tip into harshness as well.

What further aids this is the sense of liveliness and rhythmic ability that

**The Motive 3 is very strong across a wide variety of disciplines**

the Neat is able to deliver to performances. With more relaxed music it reveals itself as possessing an agility and fleetness of foot that is extremely beguiling, but as the tempo increases the simple control and ability that it has over complex bass lines is absolutely exceptional. The bass response on offer is also deeper and more detailed without losing any of the pace and energy.

This isn't a perfect speaker by any means. The absolute levels of detail extraction aren't as forensic as some rivals and although they are happy in the default listening position, placing the Motive 3s any closer to the wall creates audible energy from the bass port. Overall though, the Neat produces an incredibly consistent performance across the entire frequency response and has a musicality that is hard not to like.

Throw in the solid build quality and handsome aesthetics, and you have a speaker that's very hard to beat. **ES**

## DETAILS

**PRODUCT**  
Neat Motive 3

**PRICE**  
£945

**ORIGIN**  
UK

**WEIGHT**  
6kg

**DIMENSIONS**  
(WxHxD)  
160 x 325 x 200mm

**FEATURES**  
• 25mm inverted titanium dome NMT tweeter  
• 134mm bass/midrange driver  
• Quoted amplifier power up to 100W

**DISTRIBUTOR**  
Neat

**TELEPHONE**  
01833 631021

**WEBSITE**  
neat.co.uk

**REVIEWED**  
HFC 371 Group Test

## Hi-Fi Choice

### OUR VERDICT

#### SOUND QUALITY

★★★★★

#### VALUE FOR MONEY

★★★★★

#### BUILD QUALITY

★★★★★

#### EASE OF DRIVE

★★★★★

#### OVERALL

★★★★★

**LIKE:** Impressive musicality; good tonal balance; excellent build  
**DISLIKE:** Slightly fussy positioning; not hugely sensitive

**WE SAY:** An accomplished all rounder that manages to sound good across a wide variety of music

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[www.martinsifi.co.uk](http://www.martinsifi.co.uk)  
01603 627010

### LONDON

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020 7607 2148

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Lewisham  
[www.billyvee.co.uk](http://www.billyvee.co.uk)  
020 8318 5755

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[www.grahams.co.uk](http://www.grahams.co.uk)  
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[www.unilet.net](http://www.unilet.net)  
020 8942 9567

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**Nottingham Hi Fi Centre**  
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0115 9786919

**NORTH EAST**  
**Sound Organisation**  
York  
[www.soundorg.co.uk](http://www.soundorg.co.uk)  
01904 627108

### NORTH WEST

**Acoustica**  
Chester  
[www.acoustica.co.uk](http://www.acoustica.co.uk)  
01244 344227

**Chris Brooks Audio**  
Warrington  
[www.chrisbrooksaudio.com](http://www.chrisbrooksaudio.com)  
01925 261212

**SOUTH EAST**  
**Home Media**  
Maidstone  
[www.thehomeofhifi.com](http://www.thehomeofhifi.com)  
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020 8943 3530

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Guildford  
[www.pjhifi.co.uk](http://www.pjhifi.co.uk)  
01483 504801

**Soundcraft Hi-Fi**  
Ashford  
[www.soundcraftifi.com](http://www.soundcraftifi.com)  
01233 624441

**SCOTLAND**  
**Glasgow Audio**  
Glasgow  
[www.glasgowaudio.com](http://www.glasgowaudio.com)  
0141 332 4707

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Aberdeen  
[www.holburnhifi.co.uk](http://www.holburnhifi.co.uk)  
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**The Sound Gallery**  
High Wycombe  
[www.soundgallery.co.uk](http://www.soundgallery.co.uk)  
01494 531682

**SOUTH WEST**  
**Gulliford Audio**  
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believable space. Mark Knopfler's guitar in the 24/96 FLAC *Privateering* is also presented with a depth and realism that is hard not to like. Vocals are impressive too. There is a sense with *Privateering* that the Opera actually gives precedence to the guitar, although there is still realism and composure evident that is extremely appealing.

So far, this is all in keeping with the standard Opera abilities but when you switch to the more muscular 16/44.1 FLAC *The Altogether, Doctor?* by Orbital, it reveals some surprising attributes. The first is that the bass response is impressively deep, fast and controlled and has a punch that

## A wonderfully beguiling top end with a determined sense of drive

is not something you would always associate with Opera speakers of old. There is also a sense of drive and timing that gives more up-tempo pieces an intensity and liveliness that is extremely entertaining. The Mezza might not be hugely agile, but the combination of the lucid top end and the capable timing is very much appreciated.

The Opera Mezza is a speaker that balances a considerable talent with calmer pieces and a wonderfully beguiling top end with a much more determined sense of drive and timing when asked to pick up the pace. The bass is not as tight or defined as some, but it is good enough to make it much more of an all rounder than its predecessors and many rivals. Take into account the excellent finish and wide range of colour options as well as the competitive price, and you have a very fine speaker indeed, and one that is well worth seeking out for an audition. **ES**

# Opera Mezza

This suave Italian standmount speaker has the sonic muscle to match that elegant appearance

**O**pera has been producing a range of distinctively styled speakers from its Treviso factory since the late eighties. The speakers are all named after operatic terms and are intended to be seen as visually elegant pieces of furniture just as much as they are designed for top-notch music reproduction.

The Mezza is the smallest member of the Classica range. It is a two-way design with a ported cabinet. It contains a 25mm soft dome tweeter paired with a 127mm paper driver. The Opera is another speaker that only supports single wiring, but it provides a substantial set of terminals to facilitate this.

### Sound quality

It comes as a little bit of a surprise during the listening session.

Historically, Opera's past speaker releases have been smooth and extremely beguiling, but this one tends towards slightly excessive warmth and smoothness as well as a somewhat soft bass response. The result is extremely appealing with certain genres of music, but means that it's not necessarily a great all rounder.

The Mezza doesn't throw the baby out with the bathwater, however. This is still an extremely civilised loudspeaker. The upper registers have an almost liquid quality to them and the strings of Max Richter's interpretation of Vivaldi's *Four Seasons* are rich, detailed and extremely inviting. The Opera manages to produce an impressive soundstage that extends beyond the physical position of the speakers and places instruments in a logical and

### DETAILS

**PRODUCT**  
Opera Mezza  
**PRICE**  
£850  
**ORIGIN**  
Italy  
**WEIGHT**  
8kg  
**DIMENSIONS**  
(WxHxD)  
170 x 315 x 290mm  
**FEATURES**  
• 25mm dome tweeter, ferrofluid, decompression chamber  
• 127mm woofer double treated cone  
• Quoted amplifier power up to 70W  
**DISTRIBUTOR**  
UKD  
**TELEPHONE**  
01753 652669  
**WEBSITE**  
operaloudspeakers.com/en  
**REVIEWED**  
HFC 371 Group Test

### Hi-Fi Choice

#### OUR VERDICT

##### SOUND QUALITY

★★★★★

##### VALUE FOR MONEY

★★★★★

##### BUILD QUALITY

★★★★★

##### EASE OF DRIVE

★★★★★

##### OVERALL

★★★★★

**LIKE:** Smooth, refined yet lively sound; excellent build and colour range options

**DISLIKE:** Some limits to bass; looks may well divide opinion

**WE SAY:** A very refined speaker that still manages to sound exciting when required

★★★★★



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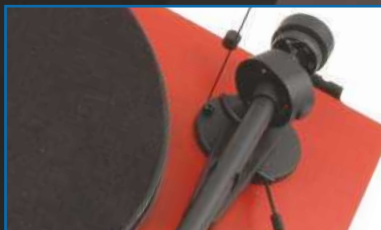
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## PMC twenty.21

**T**he tweeter of the twenty.21 is a 27mm Sonolux soft dome that PMC developed in tandem with drive unit manufacturer SEAS. It has a distinctive metal grille that acts like a type of lens to improve dispersion. PMC is big on dispersion and goes to enormous efforts to make it consistent across the band. That's why the crossover point is a very low 1.8kHz – it means that where the mid/bass hands over to the tweeter the two have as close a dispersion pattern as possible. The bass driver itself has a lightweight doped cone in what the company calls natural fibre.

Cable connections are via bi-wire binding posts that are supplied with gold-plated jumper bars so it's not necessary to have bi-wire cables.

### Sound quality

The chief appeal of the twenty.21 is its remarkable sense of speed. It is an incredibly coherent speaker, so much so that it out performs larger multi-way speakers at rather higher prices in this critical respect. This is undoubtedly related to the work

PMC has done to eliminate resonance in the solid parts of the system – resonance that is so common in speakers that it's a breath of fresh air to find one with so little.

After some experimentation I discover that while this isn't a difficult speaker to drive, it responds well to amps with grip like the Leema Tucana, so this is what is used for most of the listening.

The first thing that hits you is the bass. Diminutive speakers have a psychological advantage in that expectations are low, so when real bass appears it's all the more welcome – but here it's different. This is very clean, taut and well-defined bass. It doesn't go all the way down, but goes far enough to do the business with the likes of *Dub Colossus*, which also throws up a massive soundstage that takes over the entire end of the room and the speakers themselves disappear. Next up is a bit of classic bop in the form of Herbie Hancock's *Emptyrean Isles*, here the twenty.21 shows me just how incredible the band is by delivering the pace at which they work without any

overhang. The energy they manage to put down on tape is extraordinary and seemingly none of it is left to the imagination, even if the recording is short on bass extension. Another Blue Note recording from the same era – Art Blakey's *Moanin'* – lets the speaker show just how different recordings can be, even if they came from similar sources. The character of each is loud and clear, but it's the playing that takes centre stage.

A recording from the seventies, Frank Zappa's *Joe's Garage*, has immense scale, but the imaging remains crisp within this context – you can pinpoint individual instruments and voices within the cavern created by effects. It's so nimble and agile it's uncanny. Smaller speakers are always going to have the edge in terms of pace, but usually this is at the expense of bass power. Here the bass is both sufficiently muscular and extremely coherent and the timing is quite simply second to none.

This little speaker is a lot more capable than virtually all the compact standmounts I've listened to. The combination of mercurial speed, effortless full-scale imaging and decent bass extension for the size makes it irresistible to the discerning music lover.

There doesn't seem to be a music type that it can't do justice to, there are occasions when more low-frequency gravitas would be nice it's true, but far more where the sheer speed and lack of time smear means that you are too caught up in the music to worry about tonal balance.

Add in the attention to detail throughout the design and the first-class build and finish and you have a loudspeaker that is very hard to beat. There are boutique brands with more caché, but you should buy them for snob value alone. If you want to really get involved in your music then I'd challenge you to find a better compact standmount. **JK**

### DETAILS

**PRODUCT**  
PMC twenty.21

**PRICE**  
£1,375

**ORIGIN**  
UK

**WEIGHT**  
5kg

**DIMENSIONS**  
(WxHxD)  
152 x 325 x 277mm

#### FEATURES

- HF drive unit: 27mm soft dome, ferrofluid cooled
- LF drive unit: 140mm lightweight doped cone
- Quoted sensitivity: 87dB
- Quoted nominal impedance: 8 ohms

**DISTRIBUTOR**  
PMC

**TELEPHONE**  
0870 4441044

**WEBSITE**  
pmc-speakers.com

**REVIEWED**  
HFC 379

### Hi-Fi Choice

#### OUR VERDICT

##### SOUND QUALITY

★★★★★

##### VALUE FOR MONEY

★★★★★

##### BUILD QUALITY

★★★★★

##### EASE OF DRIVE

★★★★★

##### OVERALL

★★★★★

**LIKE:** Everything from the transparency to the thrill of the music and the image scale

**DISLIKE:** A matte finish lacquer would be nice, but what's not to like?

**WE SAY:** Stunningly good; in some respects the most thrilling sub-£2K speaker around





# Q Acoustics Concept 20

**Q** Acoustics new Concept series takes the raw ingredients of the current 2000i series and builds them better. That's the thinking behind this new Concept 20, and it's either very risky or rather clever depending on how you look at it.

The result is a compact, but weighty box, with the drive units mounted in a conventional reflex-loaded way, crossing over at 2.9kHz – the crossover is heavily modified due to the quieter cabinet. The company claims it has a sensitivity of 88dB/1W/1m, which isn't earth shattering, but certainly not poor for the size. A nominal impedance of 6 ohms is quoted, so it's not too hard a load and amplifiers of around 25W minimum should be able to get it to produce more than a squeak.

## Sound quality

These boxes sound similar in the sense of belonging to the same family, but they're far more polished, punchy and poised. Herbie Hancock's *Future Shock* shows a highly animated

performance, the speakers really get into the groove of the song and pound it out at you. Even on the overmodulated guitar solo they don't descend into harshness. Instead, they bounce along, throwing out loads of detail and energy, making them real fun to listen to. Bass proves nicely extended considering their size, too.

Tonally, they're certainly on the warm side, even with the bungs in. Indeed, they're the most congenial sounding small speaker I've heard for a long time. By this I mean you find yourself immersed in the middle of a vast stereo soundstage with no rough edges and a big, fat bass that just seems to pick out the bass drum in the mix to give things that little extra punch. Even with the relatively neutral Naim DAC-V1/NAP 100 DAC/preamp and power amp combo driving them, The Police's *Message in a Bottle* (at 24/88) is as fruity as ripe Spanish tomato. Bass isn't the tightest I've heard, instead the Concept 20 makes a direct line for the song's groove and pushes it along like it's in a hurry to get home.

## DETAILS

**PRODUCT**  
Q Acoustics Concept 20  
**PRICE**  
£350  
**ORIGIN**  
UK/China  
**WEIGHT**  
5.6kg  
**DIMENSIONS**  
(WxHxD)  
260 x 280 x 170mm  
**FEATURES**  
• 25mm soft dome tweeter  
• 125mm mid/bass driver  
• Quoted amplifier power 25-75W  
**DISTRIBUTOR**  
Armour Home Electronics  
**TELEPHONE**  
01279 501111  
**WEBSITE**  
qacoustics.co.uk  
**REVIEWED**  
HFC 372

It's curious to think that the Concept 20s use the same tweeters as the 2020is; the latter isn't bad, but these new speakers are both far lighter and more open sounding up top, and less harsh, too. Hi hat cymbals are beautifully resolved and The Who's *Pinball Wizard* with its frenetic hacking of hats and rides is great fun. The speakers also bring the snares out brilliantly, and factoring in that wonderfully propulsive bass line, lots of fun is had. It takes Keith Moon's drumming to show that – in the final analysis and at very high levels – the Concept 20s sit on dynamics a touch. This isn't a criticism, as you wouldn't expect anything else at £350, but it comes as a reminder that I'm not listening to a £750 box.

The midband isn't the most clinically neutral either, rather it lends a very pleasant warmth to everything it touches, and is nicely coherent in the way it integrates the two drivers. This makes for an arresting rendition of the Teardrop Explodes' *The Great Dominions*. Mr Cope sounds a touch more nasal than perhaps he should, but his voice is still carried in a very lucid and believable way, pushing out far in front of the plane of the speakers without ever grating. It is also very nicely placed in space; these have really solid imaging.

If you're after high levels of accuracy and analysis, then you're not going to get them from any £350 loudspeaker, and the Q Acoustics Concept 20 doesn't change this. However, on its own terms, it's a great success – being riotously good fun to listen to, romping along to the groove of the music with enormous energy. Better still, it does all this while not committing any cardinal sins – the music never assaults you or wears you down. As such this new speaker is an important addition to the budget speaker market, offering a warmer and more emotive sound than was previously available at the price. **DP**

## Hi-Fi Choice

### OUR VERDICT

#### SOUND QUALITY

★★★★★

#### VALUE FOR MONEY

★★★★★

#### BUILD QUALITY

★★★★★

#### EASE OF DRIVE

★★★★★

#### OVERALL

★★★★★

**LIKE:** Wonderfully energetic, sumptuous, musical sound

**DISLIKE:** Not the most forensically revealing at the price

**WESAY:** A really impressive step-up for Q Acoustics, more of the same please!



# Raidho C1.1

**T**he well-engineered C1.1, sports a painted, 25mm-thick high-density fibreboard cabinet, with the drive units fixed directly to the rear face of the 20mm-thick aluminium two-piece baffle. This gives a very stable mounting for the drivers, the first of which is a bespoke, in-house planar-magnetic tweeter using a thin aluminium trace etched onto a diaphragm of mylar sheet. Magnets either side move it in time to the music to produce the sound and the sound it produces is blisteringly fast, as the overall mass of the thing moving the air is far less than a metal or doped paper dome.

Raidho has developed a special 115mm ceramic-coated cone for the mid/bass unit. Just 100-microns thick, with an aluminium base sandwiched between the coating, it is designed to offer a light, stiff and well-damped structure to move the air. Behind this, the driver motor is an array of neodymium magnets in a push-pull arrangement, vented to further aid dynamics and reflex

loaded by a rear-facing port. These two drive units are divided at 3kHz by a simple second order crossover using bespoke inductors and capacitors built to high tolerances, set into the narrow cabinet.

## Sound quality

From the first bar of the first phrase of the first piece of music you play, it is clear that this is a special loudspeaker indeed, making a very good job of dissolving into the middle distance, letting the music's flavour flood out. Because it's so small, it has no issues of bass overhang. The ported cabinet is obviously super-stiff, because there's not the faintest whiff of low frequencies being given undue licence to impose themselves on the overall performance. Rather, the Raidho reigns the bass in – as the chugging sequenced electronic low notes of *The Beloved's Time After Time* demonstrate. While many larger boxes get bogged down in communicating how the bassline modulates up and down the scale, the C1.1 gives a crisp, clear rendition of

the tune the bass synth is playing, but doesn't fall over its own shadow attempting to convey the full power of the thing.

The midband is a real *tour-de-force*. It is wonderfully open – no small thanks to that treble unit, which reaches down lower than many. There's little sense of listening to two drivers at the same time, as they cross over so well to provide a searching and insightful window into the mix. The speed of it all is dazzling, and the dynamics are excellent, too. The result is that you can cue up a slice of jazz funk like Deodato's *Uncle Funk* and get an incredibly resolved performance, these speakers digging unexpectedly deep into the recording to reveal its every nuance. Soundstaging is excellent, images hovering in space in an almost ethereal way and locked in position with great precision.

The C1.1 can dazzle with its technical virtuosity, but how does it fare with far less 'hi-fi' programme material. In a word, superbly. Playing an old Sniff 'n' the Tears track, *Driver's Seat*, I'm really surprised by the musical fluency that greets me. This isn't a great recording, but the Raidhos don't mind, locking on to the rhythms instead, working on the emotional impact of the track. They're fast but subtle, refusing to shout at you and push everything into your face – dynamically they're really very good at those 'grey scales', signposting precisely the energy with which the drum skin is hit or the bass guitar string is plucked. This is the sort of sound you can only get when a loudspeaker is truly self-effacing, imposing relatively small amounts of its physical presence on the sound.

Of course, it's a small standmount design with limited low bass, but somehow this doesn't appear to intrude on the overall listening experience, as the speaker itself is so wonderfully lyrical and lucid. **DP**

## DETAILS

**PRODUCT**  
Raidho C1.1

**PRICE**  
£8,000

**ORIGIN**  
Denmark

**WEIGHT**  
12.5kg

**DIMENSIONS**  
(WxHxD)  
200 x 370 x 360mm

**FEATURES**  
• Sealed ribbon high frequency driver  
• 115mm ceramic mid/bass driver  
• Recommended amplifier power: >50W

**DISTRIBUTOR**  
Raidho

**TELEPHONE**  
+45 98247677

**WEBSITE**  
raidho.dk

**REVIEWED**  
HFC 371

## Hi-Fi Choice

### OUR VERDICT

#### SOUND QUALITY

★★★★★

#### VALUE FOR MONEY

★★★★★

#### BUILD QUALITY

★★★★★

#### FEATURES

★★★★★

#### OVERALL

★★★★★

**LIKE:** Translucent sound; blistering transients; fine dynamics; superb build

**DISLIKE:** Price; limited bass extension; needs powerful amplifier for serious levels

**WESAY:** Expensive yes, but one of the very best small standmount loudspeakers on sale



# Sonus faber

## Venere 1.5

**T**he 1.5 is the smaller of two standmounts in the Venere range and the least expensive. It is a two-way design with the same 29mm soft dome tweeter seen in the rest of the range mated with a 150mm mid bass driver that makes use of the same 'Curv' technology as the other Veneres. A single small slot port at the front of the cabinet augments bass performance while around the back, impressively sturdy terminals should allow for the connection of pretty much any cable that takes your fancy.

### Sound quality

I connect the Veneres to a Naim SuperNait integrated amp and ND5 XS streamer with XP5 XS power supply. While probably not the first choice of most Sonus faber customers, the results are impressive. Some aspects of the performance are recognisable from the larger 2.5, mainly the treble performance. The Sonus faber is possessed of an exceptional balance of detail and clarity, but even with less than stellar

recordings it never tips over to harshness or aggression. This allows it to snarl its way through Kasabian's *Velociraptor* and capture the fury of the music without giving in to the less than stellar recording quality.

Give them something well recorded, though, like the 24/96 FLAC of Mark Knopfler's *Privateering* and the Venere rewards with a performance that is exceptionally open, involving and utterly believable. The balance the Veneres have means you can listen to them for hours at a time without fatigue, which is the hallmark of a speaker you want to live with long term. As a fairly small speaker, there are limits to the scale it can achieve, but the performance never seems curtailed. The massed instruments of the Cinematic Orchestra in *Manhatta* are given the space they need and sensing their placement relative to one another is a breeze.

The other instantly noticeable and likeable aspect of their performance is the agility they possess. The work that has gone into the midbass driver has resulted in a speaker that is able to

stay on top of material pretty much regardless of speed and ferocity. The Venere keeps the same clean and ordered presentation even as the tempo rises and never loses the sense of control and cohesion that it displays with more relaxed material.

Some of this more rapid and bass-driven material does show up a slight weakness. The bass extension is pretty good for a relatively compact speaker, but there is a sense that it has been achieved at the expense of some of the lower midrange energy, which can seem slightly recessed by comparison. This is never pronounced enough to really detract from the enjoyment of the performance, but it is something with material that is dependent on this part of the frequency response.

Substituting an Audio Analogue Verdi Cento integrated amplifier for the SuperNait yields a bigger surprise than I was expecting in that although the presentation of the two amplifiers is very different, the overall presentation of the Venere is not affected to anything like the degree that I originally anticipated. The slightly fuller presentation of the Audio Analogue is reflected in the performance to an extent, but the way that the Venere goes about making music is not seriously altered. Connecting a studiously neutral Cambridge Audio 851A yields similar results.

This is a speaker that manages to look and feel special in a way that we expect a Sonus faber should, but more importantly delivers a performance that has long-term listening pleasure down to a fine art. It isn't perfect – there are speakers at the same price point with slightly more even low-end response, but this minor concern isn't the end of the world. This is a speaker with a real-world price tag that delivers a little slice of the magic the Sonus faber marque is capable of. **ES**

### DETAILS

**PRODUCT**  
Sonus faber  
Venere 1.5

**PRICE**  
£950

**ORIGIN**  
Italy

**WEIGHT**  
6kg

**DIMENSIONS**  
(WxHxD)  
206 x 394 x 300mm

**FEATURES**  
• HF drive unit:  
29mm high-definition pre-coated fabric dome  
• Bass/mid drive unit: 1x 150mm driver – mid woofer free compression bracket design and Curv cone  
• Quoted nominal impedance: 6 ohms

**DISTRIBUTOR**  
Absolute Sounds

**TELEPHONE**  
020 89713909

**WEBSITE**  
sonusfaber.com

**REVIEWED**  
HFC 374

### Hi-Fi Choice

#### OUR VERDICT

##### SOUND QUALITY

★★★★★

##### VALUE FOR MONEY

★★★★★

##### BUILD QUALITY

★★★★★

##### EASE OF DRIVE

★★★★★

##### OVERALL

★★★★★

**LIKE:** Detailed, refined sound, elegant looks and solid build

**DISLIKE:** Stand is pricey, slight lack of lower midrange

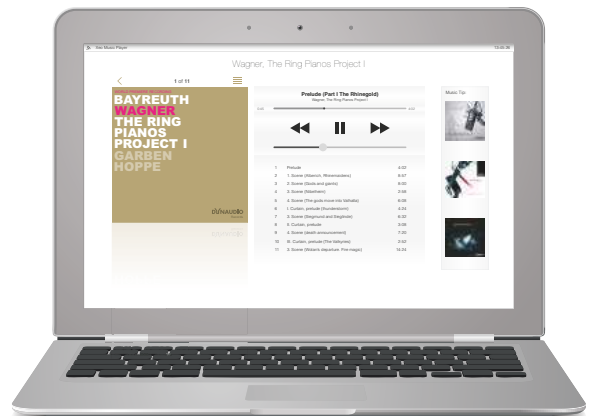
**WE SAY:** An affordable way into Sonus faber ownership that delivers much of what it is so well regarded for



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# Dynaudio

## Xeo 5

Serious hi-fi sound without the stacks of separates? Too good to be true, surely? It's time to put Dynaudio's Xeo tech to the test

**W**hat gives the Xeo 5 its *raison d'être* is a 50W digital amplifier tucked away in its base. Of course, being active means it isn't truly wireless, as the need for speaker cabling is replaced with the need for a mains lead.

What the Xeo concept really waves *au revoir* to is multiple boxes in the replay chain, which are minimised thanks to its nifty transmitter and remote combo. The tiny transmitter acts as a kind of portable preamp, sending audio from its four inputs wirelessly to the speakers' inbuilt

### Offers music lovers a balanced, real hi-fi sound from a fuss-free platform

amps, which is then controlled by the remote control. All audio is sent digitally at a maximum of 16-bit/48kHz, so higher-res material is downsampled and analogue is converted to digital within the transmitter, before being beamed over to the speakers.

The Xeo 5 is an internally braced, rear-ported cabinet made from 18mm MDF with a 25mm front baffle. You also get Dynaudio's trademark built-in plinth and four flat, circular feet that aid stability. It has two 5in long-throw woofers using Dynaudio's proprietary magnesium silicate polymer ('MSP') mid/bass cones that work in parallel, while a 27mm soft dome tweeter is on treble duty.

### Sound quality

Unlike Dynaudios of old, the Xeos don't need acres of space around them to really sing, and their bass response tolerates closer positioning to a rear wall before you're reaching for the supplied bungs. The treble is smooth enough for the speakers to be

toed-in a few degrees to help focus vocals, without making them sound harsh or emphasising sibilance.

Connecting the Xeo 5 transmitter via USB to my laptop running JRiver, Grant-Lee Phillip's *See America* at 16-bit/44.1kHz gets my attention. The lush slow strums of his guitar stretch across the soundstage and the Dynaudios lavish each simple guitar stroke with clarity and rich texture.

Given their relatively narrow profile and their woofers' modest size, I'm surprised by the Xeo's power to fill the soundstage and drive my room with convincing authority. Yet, unlike many floorstanders that attempt to punch above their weight and size by being overly 'shouty' or emphasising bass presence (to mask a lack of bass detail), their mature personality has an even presentation that doesn't overly favour one particular area of their sound.

But do they stir the emotions? Playing Bjork's *Medúlla* through the Xeos exposes the passion behind the performance. On the *Desired Constellations* track, the Icelandic songstress' vocal gymnastics can sometimes pummel your senses until her voice's tenderness is lost. Via the Dynaudios, however, Bjork's voice is controlled and given the space and freedom to swing from intimate to majestic when the moment takes her, and I'm filled with anticipation as she draws breath, ready to sing her next lyric. Despite the Xeo's volume level operating across a claimed 51 steps, I find myself searching for ideal levels between the steps, and I'd welcome slighter increments of adjustment.

Stretching the Xeo's further with a 24/96 FLAC file of Eroica Quartet's *Mendelssohn Octet Op.20* highlights how these speakers can go up a gear when asked, despite their 16/48 limit on paper. Although I'm not getting the full 96kHz version from the speakers (as JRiver recognises the transmitter's 48kHz limit and adjusts its outgoing

#### DETAILS

**PRODUCT**  
Dynaudio Xeo 5

**PRICE**  
£2,635

**ORIGIN**  
Denmark

**WEIGHT**  
16.7kg

**DIMENSIONS**  
(WxHxD)  
170 x 922 x 275mm

**FEATURES**  
• Internal 50W digital amps  
• 5in mid/bass driver  
• 1in tweeter  
• Claimed frequency range: 36Hz-22kHz (+/-3dB)

**DISTRIBUTOR**  
Dynaudio UK

**TELEPHONE**  
01353 721089

**WEBSITE**  
dynaudio.com

**REVIEWED**  
HFC 376

sample rate to match), it's hard to tell from the refined sound emanating from the drivers. The Quartet's multi-layered strings are still a delight to hear, full of detail and genuine depth. Perhaps they don't make this track come across as smooth and organic as I know the 96kHz version can sound, but what the Xeos do reveal is how close 44.1/48kHz can get to the higher sample rate numbers when the quality of the recording is top notch in the first place.

As the Dynaudio package purports itself to be a space-saving integrated amp alternative, it seems only fitting to test its mettle with a medley of sources, and sending vinyl over the airwaves is a fascinating exercise in marrying traditional hi-fi with modern convenience.

Pumping The Doors' *LA Woman* from my Primare R32 phono stage in to the transmitter reveals how the Dynaudios aren't afraid of making music from any source, although the vinyl version sounds less enthusiastic and lifelike compared with its CD-ripped alternative. While analogue inputs are certainly a worthy inclusion, sound wise it's playing digital audio that the Xeo package really excels at.

In conclusion then, the Xeo 5 is an innovative speaker/amp combo that offers music lovers a supremely balanced, real hi-fi sound from a fuss-free platform. These floorstanders are blessed with a smooth, expansive sound, especially in the bass regions, and their even tonality ensures a very easy to live with presentation.

If it matters less to you that your system plays hi-res music at its native resolution right through the replay chain, and you want a simple package that makes music sound good without the hassle, cost and space needed for a separate amp, DAC and reams of speaker cable, the Dynaudios could be just what the doctor ordered. **AS**

### Hi-Fi Choice

#### OUR VERDICT

##### SOUND QUALITY

★★★★★

##### VALUE FOR MONEY

★★★★★

##### BUILD QUALITY

★★★★★

##### FEATURES

★★★★★

##### OVERALL

★★★★★

**LIKE:** Elegant looks; simple to use; great sound

**DISLIKE:** Limited to CD-quality playback; poorly stepped volume

**WE SAY:** Quality speakers and space saving amp solution gives real hi-fi sound from minimal boxes







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**hi-fi** |'hī'fī| informal  
*adjective*  
of, used for, or relating to the  
reproduction of music or other  
sound with high fidelity.  
*noun* (pl. -fis |'ha 'faizl)

## high fidelity

*noun*

the reproduction of sound with little  
or no distortion, giving a result as  
similar to the original as possible.



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Please visit [www.exposurehifi.com](http://www.exposurehifi.com)



# Epos Elan 30

With a reputation stretching back to the eighties, hopes are high for this big-hearted floorstander

**T**his is the second largest floorstander in Epos' new range of mainstream speakers; although it has three drive units it is effectively a 'two-and-a-half-way' design with both woofers working together, although the lower driver only works under 800Hz whereas the upper one goes up to 3.6kHz where the tweeter takes over. The bass units are 156mm designs with polypropylene cones and bullet-shaped dustcaps; the tweeter is a 25mm doped-fabric dome with a short horn. A simple crossover is used, bi-wirable unlike many rivals.

The cabinet uses high-quality real-wood veneer. The company says that extensive horizontal and vertical internal bracing is positioned inside the sturdy 18mm-thick MDF cabinets. They're supplied with plinths, and oddly there's a choice of two baffles – a standard 'audiophile' type and an alternative cloth-covered version. The Elan 30 boasts a quoted sensitivity of 92dB, while listening tests confirm it certainly goes loud with relatively

little power and this makes it ideal for valve amplifiers, for example. It's not too fussy about sitting close to rear walls; our review samples prove happy positioned just 20cm away.

## Sound quality

Here's a speaker that sounds both bigger than it looks, and more exciting, too. The Epos certainly isn't the largest floorstander available, but no one seems to have told it! The result is an expansive sound, both across the soundstage from left to right, and also in terms of depth perspective, too. Unlike the Tannoy Revolution DC6T SE – which it went up against in our original *Group Test* and is another feisty performer – the Epos doesn't throw everything out at you in your face. There's a little more room to breathe and this is appreciated on the High Llamas *Santa Barbara*, which is certainly a little forward tonally. The Epos delivers a balanced, but involving sound that lets the listener follow the natural musical progression of the song well.

It doesn't deconstruct things, but does still dig deep into the mix to let the music really flow.

New Order's *Technique* shows it to be skillfully voiced; this can be blisteringly in-your-face with some speakers, but the Eposes sit back a little bit, tonally. They carry those lovely chiming eighties synthesisers in their full glory, never clouding or dulling them, but still they have real impact and this, alongside the spinning rhythm of the hi-hats, makes for an emotionally arresting, captivating listen. Again, the Elans seem to 'carry the tune' very well without ever being hamstrung by a lack of low bass.

## The Elan 30s roll along with the music in an easy and unobstructive way

The 1st movement of Beethoven's *5th Symphony* is an excellent showcase for these floorstanders; they have a fine range and prove that they are able to dish out low bass without recourse to boom.

As with the majority of the floorstanders in the *Group Test*, the drivers are ever so slightly audible, giving a little extra colouration, but still this doesn't intrude and the result is a lucid, musical feel to the proceedings. They're fairly large and not the most incisive across the midband. Treble is decent, with a crisp and atmospheric sparkle, but still some way behind the best. The good news continues with Lou Donaldson's *Alligator Bogaloo*, when the Elans get a chance to show their excellent rhythmic prowess; they roll along with the music in a wonderfully easy and unobstructive way. Large in scale, smooth in tone and fleet of foot, the Elan 30 is a quite excellent speaker for the money. **DP**

### DETAILS

**PRODUCT**  
Epos Elan 30

**PRICE**  
£1,000

**ORIGIN**  
UK/China

**WEIGHT**  
15.5kg

**DIMENSIONS**  
(WxHxD)  
185 x 850 x 289mm

**FEATURES**  
● 2.5-way, reflex ported loudspeaker  
● 25mm tweeter, 2x 156mm mid/bass units  
● Claimed sensitivity: 92dB/1W/1m

**DISTRIBUTOR**  
Epos Acoustics Ltd

**TELEPHONE**  
01442 260146

**WEBSITE**  
epos-acoustics.com

**REVIEWED**  
HFC 378 Group Test

## Hi-Fi Choice

### OUR VERDICT

#### SOUND QUALITY

★★★★★

#### VALUE FOR MONEY

★★★★★

#### BUILD QUALITY

★★★★★

#### EASE OF DRIVE

★★★★★

#### OVERALL

★★★★★

**LIKE:** Big hearted, smoothly balanced music maker; very easy to drive

**DISLIKE:** Lacks ultimate fine detail and transparency

**WE SAY:** Excellent all-round floorstander that will win many friends

## LOUDSPEAKER



# MartinLogan Montis

**T**he Montis are one of MartinLogan's premier hybrids, and sport a 1,118x 287mm panel, underneath which is a 256mm moving coil bass unit set inside its own enclosure – overall it makes for a striking-looking speaker.

The crossover between the panel and the bass box happens at 340Hz, which is usefully out of the area of the audio band where the ear is most sensitive. The bass unit itself is actively powered, via a 24-bit DSP crossover. Output power is said to be 200W, and the company claims a sensitivity of 91dB.

### Sound quality

The experience of listening to a top loudspeaker such as this is, in some ways, oddly underwhelming. The sound is very special and satisfies across a number of levels. But it's only when you go back to practically any other loudspeaker that you realise just how uniquely talented it is!

Correctly set up, the Montis are, essentially devoid of any significant

sonic flaw. This means as soon as you put a piece of music on, it's the music you're listening to, not the speaker. This makes for a relaxing, enjoyable, involving experience. Unlike conventional speakers it doesn't put a rocket up you the second the needle hits the groove. It's not going to give you a visceral thrill – the charms of the Montis are far subtler.

Cue up the breezy jazz pop strains of Corduroy's *10:28 From Shibuya*, and other high-end speakers will dazzle you with their sparkling treble, subterranean bass, and sheer physical impact. But you don't get that with the Montis, rather best think of them as an open, outstretched hand, ushering you into the mix. Because they're so neutral, they present an open window for you to peer through.

They do go very loud, it's just that they don't sound like it because there's so little stress and strain. Instead a spin of the volume knob clockwise simply brings you further into the recording, moving you closer up. Bass isn't digitally retouched, the midband doesn't get a makeover

and the treble is left untainted by the clanging of a metal dome creaking in and out at high speed. Instead, it's like all the huffing and puffing of a box loudspeaker has been removed, leaving a pristine wall of sound.

With Beethoven's *Pastoral Symphony* the music is wonderfully immersive and expansive yet delicate and detailed, too. Move back to a box speaker and your brain instantly hones in on the chuffing of its bass ports, and those awkward moments across the midband as the crossovers play merry hell with phase coherence. The Montis make so many conventional speakers sound fake, flawed and flatulent.

It's only when you play loud, raucous rock music that the Montis discreetly announce their presence. Yes, you still get that walk-around soundstaging. You still get that lovely, seamless wash of sound from bottom to top, without the sound of a single sonic contortion from the drive units. But you don't quite get the slap round the chops that a big pair of Vivids, B&Ws or Tannoys deliver. The opening bars of The Smiths' *Headmaster Ritual* tell the story of a lovely, couth, classy speaker that just can't quite rock out with the best of them. Still, as panel speakers go, it's quite a revelation!

The beauty of the MartinLogan Montis is the absence of vice. Contrary to what some ageing punks might believe, that doesn't make them boring – the true and upstanding performance, unsullied by deviant behaviour of their mechanical bits, means you simply get closer to the music. No bad thing, surely?

If you're looking for a 'character speaker' this isn't it. If you want a big box to make everything sound loud and proud, move on. Instead, the Montis give an altogether more rarefied pleasure, the satisfaction of having something that takes you right into the recording, in all its beauty. **DP**

### DETAILS

**PRODUCT**  
MartinLogan Montis

**PRICE**  
£9,800

**ORIGIN**  
US/Canada

**WEIGHT**  
26.3kg

**DIMENSIONS**  
(WxHxD)  
1,505 x 322 x 457mm

**FEATURES**  
• XStat CLS electrostatic high-frequency driver  
• 254mm cast basket, high excursion, aluminium coned bass driver  
• Quoted frequency response: 29–23,000Hz ±3dB  
• Quoted sensitivity: 91dB quoted impedance 4 ohms

**DISTRIBUTOR**  
Absolute Sounds

**TELEPHONE**  
020 89713909

**WEBSITE**  
absolutesounds.com

**REVIEWED**  
HFC 368

### Hi-FiChoice

#### OUR VERDICT

**SOUND QUALITY**

★★★★★

**VALUE FOR MONEY**

★★★★★

**BUILD QUALITY**

★★★★★

**EASE OF DRIVE**

★★★★★

**OVERALL**

★★★★★

**LIKE:** Open, even, musical sound; excellent textural; excellent

**DISLIKE:** Lacks visceral impact of big boxes; needs careful set-up

**WE SAY:** Beautiful high-end loudspeaker with a charmingly special sound





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**Pro-Ject**  
AUDIO SYSTEMS

\* Bordeaux finish shown

## LOUDSPEAKER



# Neat Acoustics Motive SX1

**A**fter eight years the Motives have been given a refresh and the SX1 is the largest model in the range to incorporate the new improvements. The most visible change is the tweeter. The titanium unit of old has been replaced with an aluminium design. Helping this tweeter achieve improved performance is a revised crossover. The frequency points that the crossover operates at and the general design have only been fractionally altered, but the components used have been significantly upgraded with Mundorf capacitors. The SX1s are fitted with a single set of terminals. You can order any of the SX models with two sets of terminals if you wish. The final significant change is the revised cabinet bracing, which is hoped will make the SX series stiffer and better damped than before.

### Sound quality

In the same way that the design of the SX1 is visibly related to the original Motive 1, the sonic performance

retains the basic characteristics that defined the range. The means it trades that last tiny percentile of detail in a performance for an even-handed accessibility with a variety of music making it an appealing partner across a wide variety of genres.

There is a clearly discernible sense of fun to the way that the Neat goes about making music. Seasick Steve's *Hubcap Music* has a sense of life and drive to it that makes for an engrossing performance. Picking this overall perception apart is tricky, but it seems to stem from an exceptionally well balanced presentation from top to bottom that avoids over emphasising any part of the frequency response. The handover between midrange and the new tweeter is impressively seamless and means that anything that happens within the Neat's frequency response does so in happy balance with everything else.

For what is a relatively compact and slender floorstander, the bass response is genuinely impressive.

### DETAILS

**PRODUCT**  
Neat Acoustics  
Motive SX1

**PRICE**  
£1,885

**ORIGIN**  
UK

**WEIGHT**  
14kg

**DIMENSIONS**  
(WxHxD)  
160 x 925 x 200mm

**FEATURES**  
• HF drive unit:  
25mm inverted  
anodised aluminium  
dome  
• Bass/mid drive  
units: 135mm  
polypropylene cone  
• Quoted sensitivity:  
87dB  
• Quoted nominal  
impedance: 6 ohms

**DISTRIBUTOR**  
Neat Acoustics

**TELEPHONE**  
01833 631021

**WEBSITE**  
neat.co.uk

**REVIEWED**  
HFC 379

Although it is happiest on a solid surface, the potent low end is apparent on all surfaces. As well as a genuine amount of impact, that is felt as much as heard, there is detail and agility that aids believability.

At the other end of the frequency extremes, the work that Neat has put in with the SXT tweeter has paid dividends as well. It has a sweetness to the upper registers that is largely responsible for the forgiving way it performs, even fed with less than perfect material. There is a sense that this is not the most forensic performer at the top end, but it helps the Neat to produce a wonderfully even and unfailingly musical presentation, which is never less than tonally believable. The handling of voices is unambiguously real. Their placement as part of the wider recording is entirely convincing and it once again emphasises the Neat's ability to focus on the wider performance rather than picking it apart. The soundstage is possessed of a good sense of scale and there is plenty of detail between the speakers. Reducing the toe-in seems to widen things, although it's at the expense of the three dimensionality.

Having spent some time with the Motive SX1, the impression is almost positive. Anyone that's looking for night and day differences between the original and this newly revised model might well be disappointed, but what Neat has done is carefully and systematically look at a very sound design with a fresh viewpoint. None of the changes that have been made on their own have radically altered the speaker, but cumulatively they have improved the performance considerably.

This is a fantastically accomplished all-rounder that will do justice to a variety of music and will work well with amps offering the required current and drive. It's among the top performers at the price point and should be added to any shortlist. **ES**

## Hi-Fi Choice

### OUR VERDICT

#### SOUND QUALITY

★★★★★

#### VALUE FOR MONEY

★★★★★

#### BUILD QUALITY

★★★★★

#### EASE OF DRIVE

★★★★★

#### OVERALL

★★★★★

**LIKE:** Lively and engaging sound; excellent tonality; solid build

**DISLIKE:** Works best on a solid floor and needs capable amplification

**WE SAY:** A superb revision to an already capable speaker



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# Sonus faber Venere 2.5

**A**s its name suggests, the Venere 2.5 is a 2.5-way floorstanding speaker, sporting a shape which is said to be an homage to its 'mother' speaker the Aida. The treble unit is a 29mm German DKM silk dome with no ferrofluid, claimed to go from 25kHz up top, down to 2,500Hz whereupon an 180mm driver with a composite plastic Curv cone takes care of the midrange duties. It then passes the baton to another similar driver that goes from 250Hz down to a claimed 45Hz. These are set into a curved, inclined baffle – with the bass driver loaded by a reflex port on the front. Tempered glass is set into the base and top, and the speaker sports adjustable aluminium feet.

## Sound quality

The Venere 2.5 gives a wide, smooth and spacious sound. As you'd expect at the price, it's not quite as delicate, incisive and subtle as its bigger brothers, but it still retains very large

amounts of Sonus faber character in the way it behaves. This, of course, is no bad thing. Feed this speaker some pulsating pop, and it dives into it with the aplomb of something that's had an energy drink or three too many – there's plenty of emotion and brio. Yet hit it with some contemplative classical and it steps back and quietly decants the sherry, as if it's aware of the deference it needs to show such programme material.

Tonally it is generally closer to the deep, dark, sultry school of speaker design that a great many modern boxes. You'd never call it dull, but neither is it from the 'blow your wig off' side of the fence. The tweeter is a nice delicate device; inferior treble units have an amazing ability to spoil things lower down the frequency spectrum and lop the bite from the leading edges of instruments – but this does not. Ride cymbals on Caravan's *Nine Feet Underground* are very well carried. All three drivers integrate well – it's a 2.5-way design, but it gives the impression of being

cast from solid. This means that while the speaker is able to tell you all about the vivid attack transients from the steel guitar strumming on – for example – Tears for Fears' *Pale Shelter*, it doesn't lacerate your lugholes, leaving you dripping blood on the carpet.

Although the Venere 2.5 is a peppy loudspeaker, it gets its speed not from an artificially edgy tonal balance, but from high-quality drive units – which are faster than a Britney Spears wedding and held back very little by those capacious cabinets. For this reason, these loudspeakers excel through the midband. True, they're not totally transparent, but you can forgive the very slight opacity those Curv drivers lend to the sound because they are basically accurate and consistent. This makes it easy for the ear to tune in to them, and for the brain to tune them out. Kate Bush's *The Big Sky* is relatively compressed, but really gets going as she gives her lyrics both barrels towards the end of the song. The Venere 2.5 proves well able to impart the subtle dynamic contrasts in the song, hanging things together beautifully as it progressively gets more complex, without descending into any hint of hardness or muddle.

The only real marks on an otherwise squeaky-clean copybook are that there is just the teensiest sense of overhang on those bigger bass notes. While at high levels, the dynamic accenting on hard hit snare drums isn't quite as explicit as, say, on a similarly priced PMC. Generally this is pretty hard to spot, it's just when the drummer gives it 10 tenths the Venere 2.5 doesn't quite go the extra mile.

Having said that, it's a very mature performer in a way that's unexpected at the price. Factor in the superlative build, styling, finish and pedigree – and Sonus faber's new Venere 2.5 floorstanding speaker is pretty hard not to fall in love with. **DP**

## DETAILS

**PRODUCT**  
Sonus faber  
Venere 2.5

**PRICE**  
£2,000

**ORIGIN**  
Italy/China

**WEIGHT**  
19.45kg

**DIMENSIONS**  
(WxHxD):  
340 x 1,107 x 437mm

**FEATURES**

- Specified sensitivity: 89dB
- Specified impedance: 6 ohms
- 29mm silk dome tweeter
- 180mm Curv midrange unit
- 180mm Curv bass unit

**DISTRIBUTOR**  
Absolute Sounds

**TELEPHONE**  
020 89713909

**WEBSITE**  
absolutesounds.com

**REVIEWED**  
HFC 369

## Hi-Fi Choice

### OUR VERDICT

#### SOUND QUALITY

★★★★★

#### VALUE FOR MONEY

★★★★★

#### BUILD QUALITY

★★★★★

#### EASE OF DRIVE

★★★★★

#### OVERALL

★★★★★

**LIKE:** Smooth, polished tonal balance; overall musicality; superlative build

**DISLIKE:** Bass prominent, especially in smaller rooms

**WE SAY:** Beautifully presented, great sounding affordable floorstander



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# Spendor A3

Soberly styled and among the smallest floorstanders around, these are hardly an audacious fashion statement

**A** speaker brand whose name stretches back in the mists of time (well, the seventies, at least), Spendor has built a name for itself producing civilised, delicate, subtle speakers that stand apart from the mass-market boom and tizz sound. Its early connection with the BBC and its ensuing popularity with audio professionals has only bolstered its reputation. The A3 you see before you here is the company's smallest, cheapest floorstander and is far less physically imposing than many on the market. It's a two-way design, with a 22mm dome tweeter paired to a small 150mm Spendor driver sporting the company's EP38 (Engineering Polymer) cone material. Crossover point is quite high at 4.2kHz, and the speaker eschews bi-wiring.

The quality of the cabinetry is excellent, but not as flashy as some; if you're a fan of discreet-looking loudspeakers rather than imposing style statements, these will fit in well. There's a choice of black ash, cherry,

light oak and dark walnut finishes. There's a single rear-mounted bass reflex port, but because the speaker is relatively small it doesn't demand to be moved that far out into the room. The downside of its size is the poor quoted sensitivity of just 86dB; this speaker needs a sturdy transistor amplifier of at least 50W to get decent sound levels, I'd say. Also the power handling, is lower than some rival offerings that are available.

## Sound quality

From the first few bars of New Order's *Technique*, I find myself surprised by just how good these Spondors are. The amazing trick is that they're extremely detailed and highly sophisticated to listen to, yet they don't come over as analytical or dispassionate in any way. Rather, they manage to string together the rhythms of the song better than any other speaker in the *Group Test* in which they featured, and at the same time give a great insight into all the technical aspects of the recording,

such as the sonorous, ringing keyboards and Bernard Sumner's plaintive vocals. Moreover, they are surprisingly good at dynamics; even when listening at fairly low levels they sound highly expressive.

Despite that relatively poor bass extension, what bass they do have is absolutely superb; it is just strong enough to announce its presence, yet proves wonderfully supple and propulsive. It seems to integrate really well with the rest of the music, and gets the feet tapping without ever breaking into a sweat. The High Llamas' *Santa Barbara* shows that the A3 has what people used to call "a good tone"; the speakers give a great insight into the recording without

**These loudspeakers show themselves to have superb transient speed**

drawing attention to himself. Vocals in particular are a joy; the A3s shine lots of light on Sean O'Hagan's voice, and capture all the angst and emotion, yet never grate. Behind this, those harmonies soar and the instrumentation plays along in a wonderfully satisfying way.

Despite being refined and sophisticated to a degree, these loudspeakers show themselves to have superb transient speed; you can hear it from the first bar of Lou Donaldson's *Alligator Bogaloo*; the tweeter helps a lot here – the A3's high frequency unit is a class act. It has lots of air and space without being bright and shows great finesse. It also integrates very well with the rest of the music, to give an all-of-a-piece feel to the proceedings. Indeed, short of the Tannoy Revolution DC6T SE, the A3 proves one of the best in terms of stereo imaging around. It's a small speaker, but a big surprise! **DP**

## DETAILS

**PRODUCT**  
Spendor A3

**PRICE**  
£1,295

**ORIGIN**  
UK

**WEIGHT**  
12.4kg

**DIMENSIONS**  
(WxHxD)  
165 x 750 x 250mm

**FEATURES**  
• Two-way, reflex ported loudspeaker  
• 22mm tweeter, 2x 150mm mid/bass units  
• Claimed sensitivity: 86dB/1W/1m

**DISTRIBUTOR**  
Spendor Audio Systems

**TELEPHONE**  
01323 843474

**WEBSITE**  
spendoraudio.com

**REVIEWED**  
HFC 378 Group Test

## Hi-Fi Choice

### OUR VERDICT

#### SOUND QUALITY

★★★★★

#### VALUE FOR MONEY

★★★★★

#### BUILD QUALITY

★★★★★

#### EASE OF DRIVE

★★★★☆

#### OVERALL

★★★★★

**LIKE:** Thoroughly musical sound; delicacy, finesse, speed

**DISLIKE:** Styling only its mother could love; so-so sensitivity

**WE SAY:** Great stereo imaging; sounds way better than it looks!



# Aria 900

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### Flax Technology

Aria's unique speaker diaphragms consist of a layer of Flax encased in an ultra-thin fiberglass skin. This hybrid material is as rigid as Kevlar and twice as light as traditional polyglass, making it an excellent choice for sound quality.



### Performance

Aria drivers feature a new Zamak (zinc/aluminum/magnesium/copper) basket and tweeters are suspended using Poron, a 'memory foam' material developed for the reference Utopia range which reduces distortion three-fold in critical areas of the audio spectrum.



### Choice

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[www.focal.com/aria-uniti](http://www.focal.com/aria-uniti)



## LOUDSPEAKER



# Spendor D7

**L**ike many mid-sized floorstanders, the D7 is a 2.5-way design, sporting a bespoke Spendor mid/bass driver built on a pressure diecast magnesium alloy chassis. The cone uses a new formulation of Spendor's 'engineering polymer' called EP77, which is said to have a high degree of natural internal damping combined with high rigidity. This is further complemented by a lower bass driver using a Kevlar cone, with an unsaturated copolymer compound used for the surround.

The 'Linear Pressure Zone' tweeter dome is built onto a stainless steel front plate that houses a damped acoustic chamber immediately before the dome itself. This combines with a 'suspended' phase correcting screen immediately in front of the centre of the dome to equalise signal path length across its surface and create a symmetrical pressure environment. This way, the dome can operate in a completely balanced linear mode, so all parts of it are behaving in a very

similar manner thanks to the 'air damping' system. A precision woven polyamide membrane is used.

### Sound quality

The most endearing thing about this speaker is its ability to work well in real world conditions, without any fuss. The second thing to impress is its sensitivity, which seems higher than a caffeine addict giving up smoking. This makes them great for lowish-powered Class A transistor and tube amplifiers alike.

Sensitive speakers generally have a light, easy, fast air about them, and this one is no exception. Cue up the Flaming Lips' *Symphony 3000-21*, and the D7 sounds faster than any other Spendor I've ever heard, racing along capturing all the music's transients and microdynamics. Yet it doesn't seem in the least bit harsh, forward or edgy. Many 'fast' speakers achieve the sensation of speed through a little extra 'zing' across the upper mid and treble, but not so here. Instead, the D7 gives a smooth, fluid, supple

sound – devoid of any signs of drive units fighting with one another, or breaking up and distorting.

While it retains that smooth Spendor signature sound, the D7 is still able to ruthlessly render a music signal without compressing it. Spendor speakers aren't traditionally coloured, but are always more sweet than sour. The D7 is a tad more neutral than its predecessors, and the result is improved insight, with superior low-level detailing that lets you hear right into a mix. Indeed, the D7 pulls off the clever trick of sounding smooth without hiding everything under a sea of marshmallowy bass. This makes it a joy with hard, thumping techno music; Felix's *Don't You Want Me* is great fun. This design manages to string rhythms together better than any Spendor since the late great, S8e – and that's saying something.

Moving to some cool jazz of Sonar Kollektiv Orchestra's *Universal Love*, the D7 shows its ability to get into the groove. It's not one of nature's most showy music makers, rather it does surprisingly little to interfere with what it's asked to play. All you need is a gentle rhythm present and the Spendor goes looking for it. And once it's locked on, it remains fluid. This track also showcases the excellence of the treble too; it's not quite up with the best ribbons in terms of delicacy or extension, but the new tweeter comes close all the same, and integrates beautifully with the midband and bass.

If there is a criticism of the D7 it has to be the imaging. It's not bad, it's just that it doesn't match the D7's excellence in other areas.

Ultimately though, choosing a speaker is all about getting the sound that's right for you, and for me the transparency, delicacy of touch and overall musicality – allied to that tidy, well-behaved bass and smooth treble – seals the deal. **DP**

### DETAILS

**PRODUCT**  
Spendor D7

**PRICE**  
£3,495

**ORIGIN**  
US/UK

**WEIGHT**  
21kg

**DIMENSIONS**  
(WxHxD)  
950 x 192 x 320mm

#### FEATURES

- Spendor linear flow, twin Venturi port
- 22mm linear phase hybrid soft dome
- 18cm EP77 polymer coned mid/bass driver
- 18cm rigid Kevlar composite coned woofer

**DISTRIBUTOR**  
Spendor Audio Systems

**TELEPHONE**  
01323 843474

**WEBSITE**  
spendoraudio.com

**REVIEWED**  
HFC 370

## Hi-Fi Choice

### OUR VERDICT

#### SOUND QUALITY

★★★★★

#### VALUE FOR MONEY

★★★★★

#### BUILD QUALITY

★★★★★

#### EASE OF DRIVE

★★★★★

#### OVERALL

★★★★★

**LIKE:** Wonderfully open and smooth speaker that's great fun to listen to

**DISLIKE:** Lacks bass/treble extension and soundstage size of rivals

**WE SAY:** A superb floorstander, one of Spendor's best ever boxes



# *Objects of Desire*



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## LOUDSPEAKER



# T+A Criterion TCD 210 S

**L**arge, heavy and transmission line-loaded, the TCD 210 S claims high sound levels and a very wide (25Hz to 35kHz) bandwidth sound, from thunderous low bass to bat-bothering treble. Quoted sensitivity is 88dB/1W/1m, which is so-so for a big box (many rivals go louder for the same amount of power), but you can still get away with an enthusiastic 50W amplifier.

The 210 S features transmission line-loaded bass units (two of them), plus twin midrange drivers in a D'Appolito configuration. A T+A Waveguide tweeter takes care of the high frequencies all by itself. Transmission line-loading is a long, specially shaped 'organ pipe' inside the speaker cabinet; it uses a tube-like resonant cavity of a specific length to 'load' the bass driver inside the cabinet in such a way to minimise its acoustical impedance.

### Sound quality

Any 120cm tall floorstander should be pumping out a powerful, large

scale sound that extends from the low bass register to the high treble in an even way – and that is precisely what you get here. The Criterion 210 S sounds like it looks; sophisticated and commanding and this goes for any music you care to play on it. Drop Donald Byrd's *Streetlady* onto the turntable, and you hear an unusually large and widescreen presentation of this classic waxing. Bass is solid and meaty, although it sounds completely different to many other loudspeakers, as there's no obvious 'sweet spot' hanging around 100Hz, to give the middle notes on a bass guitar extra boost. Rather, this speaker is very even down below, and lets you follow the bassline without accenting any particular area of the fretboard. At first it sounds a little underwhelming, but it has a couthness that many conventionally ported speakers lack. It goes down amazingly low, yet is fast and supple and strong – just as it should be.

I'm happy to hear that the Criterion makes a pretty suave move from low to mid; like its low bass, there's a

smoothness and an evenness to it, which shows excellent breeding. The midband is wide and open, and tonally quite smooth. On the Donald Byrd track, I love the delicate flute work; this isn't an easy instrument to render smoothly, but these speakers don't fail. At the same time, snare drums have great bite, and guitars come over with great speed and dexterity. The result is an extremely engaging and enjoyable listen.

Tonally the 210 S has a bright and spry presentation. It doesn't bark out at the listener, etching the music on your forehead, but it's an extremely detailed and revealing device. Scritti Politti's *Perfect Way* is a bright slice of eighties pop with lots of rhythmic stops and starts that are always good at tripping up a big speaker such as this. Yet the T+A handles the song rather well, making clear its superb bass from the very beginning. As the bass synth noodles up and down the scale, the 210 S handles it manfully, pile-driving out large swathes of subsonics without breaking into a sweat. Still, the bass never overpowers the midband, which is a veritable battlefield of percussion and synthesised arpeggios; again it remains smooth and composed, yet it's able to convey the track's powerful dynamic accenting in its entirety. The result is an engrossing sound, that is epic in scale and highly expressive, but still coherent and believable.

Big and powerful with sledgehammer bass, the T+A TCD 210 S is an accomplished all rounder with a sophisticated, involving sound. Everything is delivered with ease, but you never forget there's an iron fist underneath that velvet glove. It's a very well balanced big box, so much so that it seems less susceptible to changes of music than many. The only criticisms is that in trying to be all things to all men, it isn't quite the best at anything. Instead it scores highly across a wide range of virtues. **DP**

### DETAILS

**PRODUCT**  
T+A Criterion  
TCD 210 S

**PRICE**  
£5,900

**ORIGIN**  
Germany

**WEIGHT**  
47kg

**DIMENSIONS**  
(WxHxD)  
1,220x300x440mm

**FEATURES**  
• D'Appolito  
treble/mid driver  
arrangement  
• 2x 220mm  
bass drivers  
• 2x 170mm  
mid drivers  
• 1x 25mm tweeter

**DISTRIBUTOR**  
Avoke

**TELEPHONE**  
07876 246956

**WEBSITE**  
ta-hifi.com

**REVIEWED**  
HFC 376

## Hi-Fi Choice

### OUR VERDICT

#### SOUND QUALITY

★★★★★

#### VALUE FOR MONEY

★★★★★

#### BUILD QUALITY

★★★★★

#### EASE OF DRIVE

★★★★★

**LIKE:** Powerful, large scale sound; wide bandwidth; fast transients; great detailing

**DISLIKE:** Size; weight; resonant metal grilles

**WE SAY:** Brilliant big bangers with a smooth and open, yet commanding, sound

### OVERALL

★★★★★



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# Ariand PRO845SE

**T**here's a clue in the name that this design is intended to use the 845 triode.

However, 211s (which look similar, but have different characteristics) can also be specified, but since changes have to be made to the amplifier to accommodate them, 845s cannot be tried later. With 211s fitted, the 845SE is rated at 25W per channel. The importer wisely de-rates this to 18W where the amount of distortion produced is more in line with hi-fi expectations.

Since it has a passive volume control stage and a source selector for up to three line-level sources (CD, DAC, tuner, tape, phono stage etc), the Ariand is, of course, an integrated amplifier. The spec is a little basic in that there's no line-level output for recording from and no headphone socket, although you do get a motorised remote volume control.

## Sound quality

Switching the PRO845SE on results in a brief burst of hum from the speakers as the big valves start to come to life, and even once things begin to settle down there is still a quiet buzz in the background. This is inevitable with directly heated valves like the 211, a pair of 'hum' controls (one for each channel) located on the top plate allow the effect to be minimised by careful adjustment.

Another adjustment located here sets the fixed bias level in conjunction with a large liquid crystal numerical display. This is very straightforward

since the target values are printed onto the surrounding metalwork, a small switch sets which channel the display is connected to and the background is illuminated in vivid blue while the adjustments are being made. There is no need for a 'power on indicator' with a 211 amplifier, the valves light up with a fiery yellow glow, which is bright enough to cue up a record by!

I set out with the overture from Rossini's *La Gazza Ladra* and in line with my expectations find the Ariand to be a brisk and flexible performer. In my particular setup it is tonally surprisingly bright and the information around the percussion is copious. The piece climaxes in a riot of sound which the PRO845SE does well to unravel, but I feel that at least part of the lowest register is not being presented in full measure as the resulting sound is a little bass-light.

The volume level that can be achieved without the onset of too much raggedness is more than ample for serious listening in a normal domestic setting, but perhaps not quite enough if you are a regular party person. Still, you can always treat yourself to a cheap, but gutsy transistor amplifier for just those sort of occasions!

Another treat is in store for me with Grieg's *Morning Mood*, the creamy smooth woodwind opening being completely transparent and life-like. Not being overly power limited allows the amplifier to render the build up into swirling strings

complete with its soaring dynamics and sense of scale. Imaging has that extra sense of width that valve amplifiers so often tend to exhibit. The sound stage goes well beyond the loudspeakers, making for a most interesting and highly enjoyable listening experience.

I decide to close the session with Billy Bragg's *Tank Park Salute*, to see just how well the Ariand handles vocals. Bragg's voice is a little more strident that it appears through other systems, but the track's wilting melancholy remains undaunted as the haunting lyrics are lifted well clear of the simple, bleak instrumentation. It is with music like this that the SET amplifier, with its ability to conjure up detail that others may appear to miss, can be used to perhaps its best advantage.

My observations of Ariand's PRO845SE are as a result of the engineering techniques used when making an amplifier such as this, rather than any particular failings of the design – which is very good.

So, if you want a valve amplifier then you may as well buy a proper one with a distinctively different sound. And for the money this one is pretty hard to beat. **TJ**

## DETAILS

**PRODUCT**  
Ariand PRO845SE

**PRICE**  
£1,450

**ORIGIN**  
China

**WEIGHT**  
29kg

**DIMENSIONS**  
(WxHxD)  
410 x 170 x 320mm

**FEATURES**  
• 3 inputs (line)  
• Option for 211 or 845 output valves  
• Remote volume control  
• Built-in bias meter

**DISTRIBUTOR**  
Audusa

**TELEPHONE**  
0208 2419826

**WEBSITE**  
audusa.co.uk

**REVIEWED**  
HFC 368

## Hi-Fi Choice

### OUR VERDICT

#### SOUND QUALITY

★★★★★

#### VALUE FOR MONEY

★★★★★

#### BUILD QUALITY

★★★★★

#### FEATURES

★★★★★

#### OVERALL

★★★★★

**LIKE:** Incredible value for money; single-ended triode sound

**DISLIKE:** Potentially tricky loudspeaker matching

**WE SAY:** For the money it's hard to think of any real argument against this amplifier if it's a SET you're after



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# Canor TP134

**H**ere's a serious attempt by a niche manufacturer to produce an affordable valve amplifier that showcases the benefits of the thermionic valve without the pitfalls. It's an EL34 pentode-based integrated amplifier that's said to work in full Class A mode up to about 10W, going on to deliver a quoted 35W per side. Four smaller 12AT7 (ECC81) tubes take care of the input stage driving duties. Canor has fought hard to modernise things from a construction point of view, but it has also put a lot of effort into the user experience. Instead of a fascia full of clumsy, ill fitting knobs and buttons, the TP134 has a single controller, which turns the unit on and off, selects source sequentially and also rotates left or right to work as a conventional volume control. This is done in conjunction with an attractive orange LED display showing level in -dB, and a cluster of source LEDs around it. And just to make things even more swish, the amplifier has a soft-start feature; which means that the glass bottles get gently powered up on switch on.

## Sound quality

For better and for worse the Canor sounds like no contemporary solid-state design! It serves up a larger-than-life sound with a thick, crunchy bass and a full, well-upholstered midband that's rich and bold, plus a sugary, but not terribly spacious treble.

For example, cue up some slick, slack modern soul such as 4hero's *Our Own Place* and you're greeted by a vast 'wall of sound' inside which

the midband assumes an almost supernatural importance. By this I don't mean it is tonally mid-forward, rather, it just seems to draw the listener further into the middle octaves of the music. Female vocals seem to have a magical directness and delicacy, snare drums feel like they're being played especially for you and pianos and strings drip with vast swathes of sparkling, sweet harmonics, giving them a gloriously ethereal quality. Above this, ride cymbals ring like bells in the night.

Talking Heads' *Naive Melody* provides a great showcase for the subtlety of the Canor. It sets up a big, fat, thumping groove with a stonking bass drum and fat snare sound, and in front of this is a huge playground where it's able to have selfish fun. It is great at conveying the scratchy rhythm guitar and squelchy analogue synths of Chris Franz and Tina Weymouth, while David Byrne's vocals come over as a kind of deranged Bryan Ferry, giving the track a distinctly haunting, ghostly feel. Here you really appreciate Canor's choice of EL34 output tube. It has a fulsome and ballsy presentation – compared with many other valves it seems eager to rush into the music and pile-drive it out at you in an unerringly musical way. And happily, the TP134's output transformers are up to the job, too.

In absolute terms, bass is a little loose and lumpy, although it soldiers on to surprisingly high levels. Give the TP134 a sterner speaker load though and even via the 4ohm tap it starts huffing and puffing, reminding you it isn't a 100W solid-stater after all. Even with benign boxes, at high

## DETAILS

**PRODUCT**  
Canor TP134  
**PRICE**  
£2,495  
**ORIGIN**  
Slovakia  
**WEIGHT**  
22.5kg  
**DIMENSIONS**  
(WxHxD)  
435 x 170 x 390mm  
**FEATURES**  
• 4x 12AT7 (ECC81) input valves  
• 4x EL34 power valves  
• Quoted power: 2x 35 RMS into 8 ohms  
• LED digital volume display  
**DISTRIBUTOR**  
Canor  
**TELEPHONE**  
01276 501392  
**WEBSITE**  
canor-audio.com  
**REVIEWED**  
HFC 372

volumes EL34s tend to compress things – albeit euphonically – and this begins to happen just as my roof starts parting company with the listening room walls. Again, this is something that you won't get with a chunky transistor amplifier, even if the sound hardens up.

With its lack of clinical transparency, classical music should be where the Canor stumbles and falls, but surprisingly it doesn't. It's true that it doesn't have that glass-clear midband that you get from the likes of the Musical Fidelity A6 500i – things sound a bit thick and soupy by comparison – but still somehow it works its magic and has me enraptured with a DG recording of Beethoven's *Pastoral Symphony*. It doesn't quite get the very first few nanoseconds of a note, and is prone to delay or even slur its decay subtly, but it's so good at communicating the rhythm and subtle dynamic phrasing of an instrument that you don't care. Not only this, it strings everything together into one large magical morass of sound that is wonderful to behold. Its sins of omission and obfuscation are plain then, but still this heroic amp charms your socks off and its faults don't seem to matter. **DP**

## Hi-Fi Choice

### OUR VERDICT

#### SOUND QUALITY

★★★★★

**LIKE:** Engaging, immersive sound; warm tonality

#### VALUE FOR MONEY

★★★★★

**DISLIKE:** Not the most transparent or neutral sound we've heard!

#### BUILD QUALITY

★★★★★

#### FEATURES

★★★★★

**WE SAY:** Tubes without tears – a really nicely packaged modern music maker

#### OVERALL

★★★★★



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# Creek Destiny 2

This range-topping amplifier from one of the UK's favourite electronics makers should be well worth hunting down

**H**ere's a company with a great pedigree for affordable integrated amplifiers. It all started with Creek's CAS4040 some three decades ago, which wowed the budget hi-fi scene with its heavenly sound quality.

Since then the British company has gone from strength to strength, but has continued resolutely making products with 'real-world' prices; this latest Destiny 2 is the company's most expensive ever. It's a well specified, nicely made amplifier with four inputs, a tape loop and an AV loop – plus there's also the option of Creek's Sequel MM/MC phono input board; two pairs of speaker outlets are additionally fitted as is a headphone socket.

The Destiny 2 sports a special Creek MOSFET power amplifier section, pushing out a claimed 120W per channel at 8 ohms (180W into 4 ohms). A magnetically shielded 300VA toroidal transformer with separate windings for high and low current analogue circuit requirements is fitted, with two separate low-loss Schottky diode bridge rectifiers to separate left and right channel power supplies. Multiple small, low

impedance 2,200uF capacitors are paralleled together for superior smoothing and there are separate feeds for all low-voltage circuits. A 50VA auxiliary toroidal mains transformer powers the microcontroller circuitry when in standby and all the digital circuitry for better sound.

**The Creek pogos along to the beat and spits out vocals with gritty intent**

## Sound quality

There's something very right about the way that this amplifier makes music. It is, of course, a solid-state design, but doesn't sound like one. But then again, it doesn't sound like a valve amplifier either. Rather, the Destiny 2 resides in a wonderful world of its own, where music just floods out of the speakers in a gloriously unselfconscious way.

Tonally, it is neither light and bright or as syrupy as your average £1,500 tube amp – rather it's just a little on the warm side of neutral, preferring

## DETAILS

**PRODUCT**  
Creek Destiny 2

**PRICE**  
£1,749

**ORIGIN**  
UK

**WEIGHT**  
10kg

**DIMENSIONS**  
(WxHxD)  
430 x 80 x 360mm

**FEATURES**  
• Quoted power output: 2x 120W RMS into 8 ohms  
• Silver or black finish  
• ALPS Blue Velvet volume control  
• 4 RCA line inputs + optional Sequel MM/MC board

**DISTRIBUTOR**  
Creek Audio

**TELEPHONE**  
01442 260146

**WEBSITE**  
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**REVIEWED**  
HFC 373 Group Test

to stand back and not force itself on the proceedings. Central Line's *Walking Into Sunshine* shows this to great effect, with a searching, insightful sound that seems to pull the listener right up to the quarter-inch jack sockets coming out of the studio mixing desk!

The contrast between this and The Jam's *News Of The World* is staggering; suddenly I find myself being transported from that deliciously fat and fulsome Central Line studio sound to a scratchy sort of acoustic, which easily could have been the band rehearsing in a phone box. The Creek signposts this with complete clarity, while pogoing along to the beat and spitting out Weller's edgy vocals with gritty intent. Even though the recording is poor, it just doesn't seem to matter, so fine is its innate sense of rhythm.

Mozart's *Symphony No. 29* is amazing; suddenly the recorded acoustic seems to swell in size and I find myself pulled into a completely different environment, with a full orchestra heaving away in my midst. String tone is excellent, the Creek captures every last sinew of the violins, yet never gets edgy. Spatially, instruments are superbly located and the Creek is exceptional by being able to dissolve the loudspeakers out of the room – whereas many rivals make the sound cluster around them. Overall, a brilliant performance from this enduring integrated amplifier – overlook it at your peril! **DP**

## Hi-Fi Choice

### OUR VERDICT

**SOUND QUALITY**  
★★★★★ **LIKE:** Crisp, enjoyable sound; superb packaging; great facilities; style

**VALUE FOR MONEY**  
★★★★★ **DISLIKE:** Absolutely nothing even at the higher price

**BUILD QUALITY**  
★★★★★ **WE SAY:** If you want a big sound in a small package, this is a great way to go

**FEATURES**  
★★★★★

### OVERALL





# Creek Evolution 50A

Proof positive that affordable audio isn't standing still comes from Creek's brand new Evolution 50A integrated amplifier

**M**ore than 'just' an integrated – the Evolution's modular design means there's a range of three (40, 48, 54dB MM or MC) Creek plug-in Sequel Phono modules that can be fitted to it. There's also the optional Ambit FM/AM tuner module (£100), and even an optional plug-in infra-red sensor (£25) that allows it to be hidden away and still be operated via remote.

The product itself is decently finished, although it lacks the glamour and chi-chi form factor of its Cyrus 6a rival. You get the standard issue Brit-fi black steel casework and chunky (black or silver) aluminium fascia. The backlit buttons are a nice touch and work well, in conjunction with the OLED display, defeatable and with adjustable brightness.

As you'd expect from a marque that takes sound seriously, inside there's a muscular 200W toroidal mains transformer with separate windings for both high and low-current analogue, plus digital circuitry. Smaller, parallel power supply

smoothing capacitors are used, as opposed to single larger ones – Creek says this helps to produce a very powerful sound. Unusually perhaps, the David Gamble Class AB design is all-discrete and uses a high-end bipolar transistor power amplifier circuit featuring a pair of 15A Sanken STD-03 power transistors. This is claimed to produce very high output current and low output impedance.

The preamplifier section is based on a Japan Radio Corp module and offers a choice of unbalanced or balanced inputs – it is very rare to see XLR connections on an integrated amplifier at this modest price – with multiple RCA input options plus volume, balance and tone controls, and can be bypassed completely should you have a DAC with a digital volume control and be that way inclined. Sadly Creek doesn't make an FM tuner anymore, but should you feel the need, that Ambit radio board effectively turns it into a receiver for just a few pounds more, and Mike Creek claims this is more than just an afterthought.

## DETAILS

**PRODUCT**  
Creek Evolution 50A

**PRICE**  
£700

**ORIGIN**  
UK/China

**WEIGHT**  
7.5kg

**DIMENSIONS**  
(WxHxD)  
430 x 60 x 280mm

**FEATURES**  
• Claimed power output: 55W into 8 ohms  
• Inputs: 4x RCA phono; 1x balanced XLR  
• Plug-in Sequel phono stage  
• Optional plug-in FM/AM tuner module  
• Optional IR sensor for remote operation bass unit

**DISTRIBUTOR**  
Creek Audio Ltd

**TELEPHONE**  
01442 260146

**WEBSITE**  
creekaudio.com

**REVIEWED**  
HFC 370

## Sound quality

With a claimed output power of just 55W (into 8ohms), this isn't going to burn a Krell-sized hole in your loudspeakers. But don't let that dissuade you, as amplifier power is only half of the equation in the quest for 'loudness', and there are plenty of efficient speakers (90dB sensitivity or more) that will make a big noise with a relatively small number of watts.

Once it has warmed through for a good few days, the Evolution 50A proves refined way beyond its price tag. Here we have something that is very clean and open – in a way a good transistor amplifier should be – but which doesn't fall into the trap of being overly analytical or matter-of-fact sounding. It's easy to make a decent transistor amplifier, but hard to make a really decent one – and that's what Creek has done.

For example, Groove Armada's *Whatever, Whenever* highlights how it can be both surprisingly transparent, bubbling with detail and finesse, yet also unerringly musical and rhythmic. The amp takes control of the track's big, fat bass guitar pattern, giving a really tactile feel to the low frequencies without ever sounding overblown or under damped. Further up the frequency band, the Creek serves up a full, expansive midband that you can really listen in to – indeed you can almost unpeel it like an onion, should you so wish. I find myself fixing on to the backing synth string sound, and from that I can delve right down into the electronic backing and rhythms with ease.

One really nice aspect to the Creek's sound is its stability; it doesn't sound fazed in the least when called upon to





The OLED display and backlit buttons make this a breeze to use

deal with the prog rock histrionics of Caravan's *Nine Feet Underground*. This is a busy track with lots of guitar noodling, frenetic stick work and a lovely, bouncy bassline – all topped off with an edgy sounding electric organ. The Evo 50A sets everything in the recorded acoustic beautifully, each strand of the mix playing along by itself untroubled by whatever is going on beside or opposite.

As well as staying scrupulously in control, it manages to slot everything together in a wonderfully rewarding way. Rhythmically it is really strong indeed – not quite up there with the best tube amps, of course – but it really gets into the groove and captures the wonderfully loose and floaty feel of this early seventies Canterbury classic.

Tonally you wouldn't call this amplifier bright – it lacks that 'spot-lit' upper midband that afflicts so many similarly priced amplifiers. I recently reviewed Pioneer's impressive A-70, and while I really enjoyed my time with it, there was definitely a sense that it shouldn't be partnered with forward sources and speakers. The Creek seems altogether better balanced, with a wonderfully seamless, all-of-a-piece feel that doesn't have you trying to compensate for its peculiarities; it's the sort of amp you could slot into a bright budget system and still retain your sanity. Not that it's tonally dull – rather it is because this amplifier is genuinely neutral. For example, Linton Kwesi Johnson's *In Dub* is a wonderfully bouncy bit of early eighties reggae, it wins no prizes in the smoothness stakes – Des 'O Connor wouldn't like it – but the Creek makes the most of it without dwelling on the recording's brightness. Conversely, cue up *Solsbury Hill* from Peter Gabriel and that fairly muddy sounding seventies rock masterpiece doesn't hide its light under a bushel, the Creek being just searching enough to really pull the recording out.

Such delicacy of touch and lack of intrinsic colouration is a rare thing to have in an amplifier of this price, and takes you beyond the position where you're always making excuses. It is happy as Larry driving the £3,500 Spendor speakers I test it with and takes a step up and tries even harder when stuck on the end of a £7,000 dCS Debussy DAC. Yet feed it the balanced output from a £600 Audiolab M-DAC a pair of £400 Acoustic Energy 301 speakers and it's almost as much fun. Likewise, this amp's innate balance makes it a joy

with a wide range of music; there's no sense of its failings flattering one type of programme material over another. From Mozart to Morrissey, it's game.

One sign of an excellent amplifier is how agnostic it is to the music it is asked to play. The Creek doesn't care one jot about whether it is drilling out classic heavy rock or mooching along to the seductive strains of Donald Byrd's *Streetlady*. This latter cut is a beautiful slice of early seventies rare groove/jazz funk, released on Blue Note records (that tells you all you need to know). The Evolution 50A shows its innate musicality, setting up a wide and deep soundstage (just as you'd expect from a classic analogue recording) and locating all the instruments within, with a high level of precision. It is controlled alright, but not controlling and allows the music to breathe a natural and organic way. This is a great strength of the Cyrus 6a, but the Creek proves

## The Creek shows its innate musicality, setting up a wide and deep soundstage

just as capable and offers up a little extra detail and a brighter, more airy soundstage to boot.

Why then would you ever need to spend more than its £700 asking price if it's so blameless in the great scheme of amplifier things? Well, of course, it's not a universal panacea and while it will trouble a number of other amplifiers costing up to twice its price, it is mortal like the rest of us. In absolute terms, the Evolution 50A lacks some bass heft; low frequencies are decently strong and nicely taut, but there's no sense that any sort of iron fist is in action. At high levels and on crescendos, when things get really complex and there's a lot of things being asked of the amplifier's power transistors and supply, you begin to hear its fallibility. Genesis' *The Squonk* really impresses with its vivid low-level detailing, but when Phil Collins gets going with his pan rolls and vocal contortions, you can sometimes catch the Evolution 50A blinking. Nothing nasty or dramatic mind you, just a subtle loosening and lightening of bass, reminding one that it's only a 50 watter after all. Likewise, transparent as the Evolution 50A is considering its modest retail price, it can't quite project the magnificent recorded acoustics that you get from some of the very best classical recordings.

An Esoteric SACD of Mozart's fantastic *Piano Concerto No. 20* (Curzon, English Chamber Orchestra) is an arresting listen, the Creek showing immaculate breeding by remaining so subtle and composed, but there is a slightly diffuse feel to the placement of individual instruments, and a sense of muddle right at the back of the concert hall – there is less atmosphere to the proceedings than you'd expect from a truly top-flight amplifier. This recording in particular is one of the very best that I've had the pleasure of hearing, so it's a tough test for any amplifier, let alone one as modestly priced as the Creek.

In the everyday scheme of things, however, these minor observations aren't seriously going to put you off the Creek, as its general quality of sound is so high for a sub-£1,000 amplifier. Moreover, it hides its tracks brilliantly, so even when you're pushing it a little too hard, asking a touch too much from it, it displays grace under pressure. Pretty much any sort of music you play comes out in a satisfyingly rhythmic way, with oodles of detail and surprising finesse.

One of the very best sounding amplifiers on sale at or near its price, the Creek Evolution 50A also offers analogue radio and (later) DAC options, plus the full smash of facilities from tone controls to a rather handy push-on mute function from the volume control.

Build is decent, finish is fine and that OLED display is a nice addition, too. Indeed, it seems like Creek has methodically gone round and painstakingly engineered out anything that reviewers like me might find to object to. Sonically superb, impressively specified and decently screwed together, there's nothing not to like here. As such, it should be placed right at very the top of your audition list. Now, that's progress for you! **DP**

## Hi-Fi Choice

### OUR VERDICT

<b>SOUND QUALITY</b> ★★★★★	<b>LIKE:</b> Detailed, musical sound; reasonably powerful; flexible; well made
<b>VALUE FOR MONEY</b> ★★★★★	<b>DISLIKE:</b> Nothing at all given the price
<b>BUILD QUALITY</b> ★★★★★	<b>WESAY:</b> The class of the affordable integrated amplifier field, this Creek deserves to succeed
<b>FEATURES</b> ★★★★★	

### OVERALL





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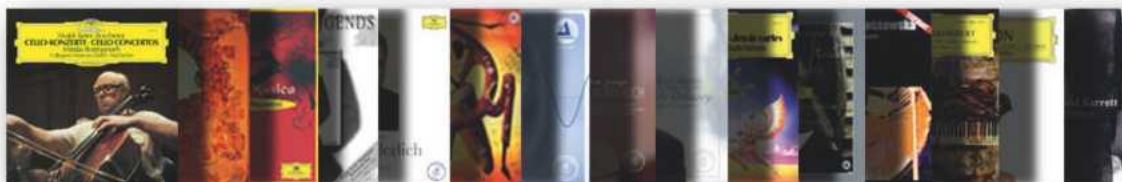
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# Exposure 3010S2

A great integrated from a great British amplifier brand, this sparsely appointed product promises much

**B**ack in the heady hi-fi days of the eighties, Exposure made its name for cleverly designed, sweet-sounding high-end transistor amplifiers that were just a little bit more palatable than the rival big Naims of the day. The company is now focused more on the affordable end of solid-state amplification. This is the second incarnation of Exposure's top integrated amplifier, and it comes with six line inputs, a MM or MC phono module option, and there's a separate preamplifier output for bi-amping via an Exposure power amplifier – this is an obvious and easy upgrade path to take as and when funds permit.

The claimed 110W RMS per channel (into 8 ohms) power output is certainly healthy, although not quite exceptional. The company says much attention has been paid to the circuit design. This includes high-quality capacitors used in the signal path, a printed circuit board that is "uniquely tuned" with short signal and power supply paths, and cascode circuitry for improved power supply immunity, plus a fast bipolar transistor output stage. This all slots into a very attractive aluminium

casing with a clean-looking, extruded front panel. Overall fit and finish of the amplifier is excellent, extending to the cleanly laid-out back panel – although gadget fans should look elsewhere; this is about as minimalist as they come.

**It serves up a vast soundstage with guitars and vocals wide left and right**

## Sound quality

From almost the first bar of Central Line's *Walking Into Sunshine*, it is clear that this is a highly accomplished amplifier. The sound is big, bold and musical, but never harsh or uncouth, meaning the Exposure plugs right into what's going on in any recording and has a whale of a time – as indeed does the listener. Whereas some musical sounding designs achieve their speed and pace by forwardness of tone or even grit and naked aggression, the 3010S2 is a model of sophistication – you can have it all!

REM's *Maps and Legends* is a thick, gloopy sort of recording, but the

Exposure cuts through it like a knife through churned milk. It serves up a vast soundstage with guitars and vocals wide left and right, inside which large amounts of detail bristle out. Compared with the equally impressive Creek (page 79), there is less sense of space around the instruments, with images pushed a little closer to the plane of the speakers instead of hanging back, but the 3010S2 makes up for it with a stronger and purposeful bass line, which hooks up with drum-kit work much better. Both are wonderfully expansive and vast in scale.

The rich Central Line track shows the Exposure has a slightly less warm sound to the Creek. Along with a marginally thinner upper midband, treble comes over with a touch more sparkle via the 3010S2. This works particularly well with classical music, giving a slightly more breezy, atmospheric presentation than the Creek, even if the depth perspective isn't quite there. Dynamics are excellent, and the Jam's *News Of The World* shows that the Exposure can go loud or quiet quicker than a blink. Overall, this is a slightly rockier, although less polished and nuanced version of the Creek, which itself is among the best in the business – making the 3010S2 an absolutely fabulous performer across the board.

A near-compulsory product for prospective purchasers to audition, then, make sure you don't let this one pass you by! **DP**

## DETAILS

**PRODUCT**  
Exposure 3010S2

**PRICE**  
£1,350

**ORIGIN**  
UK

**WEIGHT**  
12kg

**DIMENSIONS**  
(WxHxD)  
440 x 115 x 300mm

**FEATURES**  
• Quoted power output: 2x 110W RMS into ohms  
• Silver or black finish  
• Preamplifier output  
• 6 RCA line inputs + optional MM/MC board

**DISTRIBUTOR**  
Exposure Electronics Ltd

**TELEPHONE**  
01273 423877

**WEBSITE**  
exposurehifi.com

**REVIEWED**  
HFC 373 Group Test



## Hi-Fi Choice

### OUR VERDICT

#### SOUND QUALITY

★★★★★

**LIKE:** Delightfully open, expansive and enjoyable sound; super build and finish

#### VALUE FOR MONEY

★★★★★

**DISLIKE:** Nothing

#### BUILD QUALITY

★★★★★

**WE SAY:** A wonderful sounding amplifier that makes listening to any kind of music a real pleasure

#### FEATURES

★★★★★

#### OVERALL

★★★★★





# Musical Fidelity

## M6500i

**W**ith a claimed 500W RMS per channel into 8 ohms the M6500i should be sufficient for anyone. If it isn't, I'd suggest that you might have some psychological issues.

So this amplifier is a piece of work alright. It's a sizeable object and inside is laid out like a preamplifier with twin fully balanced bridge operating Class AB power amplifiers, using 12 discrete bipolar transistors per side. These are said to give 200 amps peak-to-peak, so this amp will also weld things should you so wish!

The preamplifier section has five inputs, one of which is balanced, and the auxiliary input can be switched to integrate home theatre set-ups.

### Sound quality

I nervously unpack the M6500i, only to find myself really rather beguiled by it. Yes, it's a big banger with oodles of oomph, but it is so much more than just this. Essentially, it reveals itself to be a very well designed modern solid-state amplifier, with the inevitable sonic hallmark that transistors give, but it's transparent and open enough to let you enjoy all that power and punch. This means it's more than just a thug in a dinner jacket; the M6500i has breeding and it comes across in a variety of different types of music.

A vinyl copy of Manfred Mann's *Davy's on the Road Again* can be quite a thin and reedy listen through the wrong sort of transistor amplifier; vocals are a little edgy and acerbic

and the guitars can screech. But the Musical Fidelity proves tonally quite svelte; you'd never accuse it of sugar coating the signal, or adding a fine curtain of velvet either, but it positively refuses to screech or shout.

Instead, it shows itself to have a rather incisive yet subtle midband, way better than most other solid-state amps. It is detailed and paints things in super-fine brushstrokes, very deftly.

It makes The Who's *Won't Get Fooled Again* enormous fun to listen to. Unlike many muscle amplifiers, it doesn't throw the baby out with the bath water, and reduce everything to a sort of hi-fi weight lifting contest. Yes, it demonstrates itself to be super-strong, but there is real subtlety here, too. I love the way it picks through all the strands in the mix and lets them go their own way. Having this great level of control can be dangerous, of course, with some amplifiers strangling all of the life out of the music as they rigorously deconstruct the mix, but the Musical Fidelity doesn't do this. Instead it lets everything play together in a eminently enjoyable way.

The M6500i is very well able to communicate the richness of Andrew Lloyd Weber's *Variations*; I love the fruitiness of the Moog synthesiser, the rawness of the strings and the visceral body and power of the piano. Bass guitar is fun too, this amp reminds you of its obvious brawn in the low frequencies without overstating its case. It has oceans of low-end power, yet it doesn't flood your room with

### DETAILS

**PRODUCT**  
Musical Fidelity  
M6500i

**PRICE**  
£3,999

**ORIGIN**  
UK/Taiwan

**WEIGHT**  
30kg

**DIMENSIONS**  
(WxHxD)  
440 x 160 x 460mm

**FEATURES**

- LED digital volume display
- Fully balanced operation
- Tape monitor switching
- Quoted power: 500W RMS per channel into 8 ohms

**DISTRIBUTOR**  
Musical Fidelity

**TELEPHONE**  
0208 9002866

**WEBSITE**  
musicalfidelity.com

**REVIEWED**  
HFC 372

thunderous lows just because it can. Once again, this signifies a deftness of touch that's really satisfying.

In absolute terms instruments get the sense that there's a white light being shone on them, albeit not too brightly to give you nightmares. Contrast that with the pure Class A AMS35i which has a slightly warmer colouration, and your average tube amp which is rosier still. There's another thing the M6500i gives away too – it lacks the effortless rhythmic gait of certain other designs. That's not to say it's in any way frigid sounding, as generally speaking it rocks along at a fair old pace, making music very enjoyably. It's just it doesn't have the effortless rhythmic fluidity of the AMS series, or the splendid, almost super natural timing of the best valve amps.

You heard it here first, then! The M6500i is a mere mortal, doing some things very well, and others just well. I adore the space and solidity of the stereo imaging it is capable of, and its timbral detail and midband insight. It gets top marks for its couth overall tonal balance and restraint in the bass, despite having massive reserves of effortless power to summon up if called upon so to do. **DP**

### Hi-FiChoice

#### OUR VERDICT

##### SOUND QUALITY



**LIKE:** Punchy, assured, sound; vast power will drive any speaker

##### VALUE FOR MONEY



**DISLIKE:** Not as romantic or sweet as some tube or Class A solid-state rivals

##### BUILD QUALITY



##### FEATURES



**WE SAY:** Great do-it-all powerhouse; for many audiophiles this will be the ultimate amp

##### OVERALL





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To learn more about the EPICON series and the revolutionary SMC magnet system please visit our website: [www.dali-speakers.com](http://www.dali-speakers.com)



# Naim Nait 5si

**A** slick-looking confection, Naim's Nait 5si appears distinctly more modern and professional than its 'chrome bumper' equivalent from the eighties, but it remains minimalist with only four, line-level inputs and no features or facilities to speak of.

The 5si is quoted as having an output of 60W into 8 ohms. The power output has increased from its previous 50W to 60W due to a larger transformer and an improved power supply. There's also a high-quality Class A headphone amplifier feeding a 6.35mm output connection.

## Sound quality

The 5si demonstrates a pleasingly open, revealing sound and it has no trouble in distinguishing between the Naim HDX in streamer mode and the Krell Connect, both pulling files off my primary music server over Ethernet and feeding them to the amplifier by way of a Chord Company Sarum Tuned Array, BNC-connected, Naim DAC. The character of each of the different streamers emerges with clear distinction even when those differences are truly subtle.

For example, playing Keith Richards' *Whip It Up* from *Live at the Hollywood Palladium* it captures the propulsive urgency of the snare compared to the more laid-back attack and drive on the *Talk is Cheap* album. It also latches onto the 'loose but tight' bass playing and how it powers the song so effortlessly. *Locked Away* shows that the Nait remains a highly persuasive musical performer, but in its latest guise it is equally convincing in presentational terms, laying out a well defined, broad and deep

soundstage with clearly positioned instruments occupying distinct spaces within the mix and retaining their individuality, timbre and character.

The Nait contrasts the two albums vividly, demonstrating the superior groove of *Live at the Hollywood Palladium* over *Talk is Cheap*, but also the latter's rather more pristine recording. The stereo stage is better defined, as is the vivid dynamic portrayal of instruments.

Listen to David Solid Gould Vs Bill Laswell's *Once We Were Dub* to hear truly vivid instrumental separation and dynamics – especially on the percussion. There is quite brilliant layering in the soundstage – especially the vocals. There is an excellent portrayal of instruments at the frequency extremes: stygian bass and shimmering, metallic cymbals – it's truly a high-end portrayal with the Krell Connect front end! Timbral accuracy is also readily obvious on the bass and keyboards – and sounds appear incandescent.

It really comes to life conveying the two-drummer set-up on *Burn* – the 24/96 Naim Label rip by the Sons of Kemet. It vividly contrasts the styles of the two drummers and generates the sort of excitement I am sure the band originally set out to create among its audiences.

The Nait proves exceptionally communicative with vocalists of all sorts: from Vinicius Cantuaria on his album with Bill Frisell *Lagrimas Mexicanas* to Marianne Faithfull singing *The Crane Wife 2* on the album *Easy Come Easy Go*. Both demonstrate effectively the concept of conveying the emotion in a piece of music or in a performance.

## DETAILS

**PRODUCT**  
Naim Nait 5si

**PRICE**  
£925

**ORIGIN**  
UK

**WEIGHT**  
6.4kg

**DIMENSIONS**  
(WxHxD)  
432 x 70 x 314mm

**FEATURES**  
• Quoted power output: 60W into 8 ohms, 90W into 4 ohms  
• 4 analogue inputs: 2x DIN, 2x RCA  
• 6.35mm TRS headphone socket  
• Custom-designed toroidal transformer with two separate windings

**DISTRIBUTOR**  
Naim Audio Ltd

**TELEPHONE**  
01722 426600

**WEBSITE**  
naimaudio.com

**REVIEWED**  
HFC 378

Naturally, an amplifier – especially a 60W integrated – is going to have its limitations, levels beyond which it cannot be pushed and types of music that tax its capabilities. The 5si can only stretch so far, but its capabilities are exceptional. It retains the complete tonality of the piano when pushed and does not begin to sound strained or uncomfortable as many do: it retains the complete harmonic complexity of notes and their full dynamic contrast, and so, the player's expression and drama.

With Edgard Varèse's avant garde, percussion-led *Ameriques*, the 5si demonstrates an amazingly robust and credible portrayal of the Utah Symphony Orchestra, mixing extreme orchestral climaxes with the most delicate of percussion interjections. It also seems able to maintain a wonderful perspective on the layout of the orchestra and the acoustic space in which the performance takes place. Its presentation augments the relevance of the music and enhances its effect upon the listener in a truly captivating way. It's without any sense of blandness and conveys beautiful music with appropriate enthusiasm, vigour and poignancy in a way that a great amplifier really should. **MS**

## Hi-FiChoice

### OUR VERDICT

**SOUND QUALITY**

★★★★★

**VALUE FOR MONEY**

★★★★★

**BUILD QUALITY**

★★★★★

**FEATURES**

★★★★★

**OVERALL**

★★★★★

**LIKE:** Superb musical fluency that befits a far more expensive, sophisticated design

**DISLIKE:** Not a lot

**WE SAY:** This amplifier offers near-high-end performance and will drive quite demanding loudspeakers with ease



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MUSICAL FIDELITY

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MF-100

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NEODYMIUM DRIVE UNITS



# Rega Elicit-R

**T**his full-width design amplifier has a specified output of 105W into 8 ohms, which is produced by an emulated Class A driver stage built around a complementary pair of Darlington transistors, the output devices themselves are Class A/B as is usually the case. The preamp circuit is a discrete FET-based design.

The Elicit-R is built into a very sturdy steel case with heatsinking flanking either side, it's not the prettiest of amplifiers, but feels like it's built to last. It also has a wide selection of in and output socketry on the back, these include a line or moving magnet phono input, if you don't have a turntable it functions as a line input, a lower noise input according to the spec. There are four other line inputs, a record input and two record outputs – for use with a headphone amp perhaps – preamp out and a direct input that bypasses the preamp.

## Sound quality

Initially the Elicit-R sounds a little bit forward and edgy, but this calms down with use and you can crank it without restraint. It's a powerful amplifier with lots of low-end grip for an integrated at this price, it's not the smoothest around but Regas never are, rather it defines leading edges with precision and verve. If you enjoy transients it's a highly entertaining amp. It's what reveals the precise tempo of the music and shows exactly how members of a band are interacting, how what each one plays meshes with the rest of the group. This is easy to do if there are only two or three people playing mellow stuff,

the sort of stuff you hear in many a hi-fi demo, but once things begin to get busy, components that are weak in this department begin to come unstuck. Not so the Elicit-R, which remains clear cut under pretty much all circumstances.

I particularly like the way it reveals the power in bass instruments such as the cello in the Alban Berg Quartet, not the most weighty instrument admittedly, but one that underpins the menace in the Beethoven pieces being played. You get all of the texture, but not as much of the tonal richness of the instrument as you might with some alternatives. This is not a particularly dry-sounding amp, but neither is it particularly fluid, rather it communicates the essence of the composition in a clearly paced and revealing manner.

With the Naim Label release Kairos 4tet, it conveys the space in the studio with ease and places the band in the room such that it sounds strong, dynamic and alive. A powerful experience that proves the Elicit-R can deliver the imaging goods when the source is replete with it. Another title from the same label's 24/192 high-definition remasters – Laurence Hobgood's *When the Heart Dances* – is less visceral and somewhat easier listening as a result, what it does convey is the quality of musicianship and of composition by delivering music that is hard to ignore for all the right reasons.

I use the Elicit-R with two speakers, the Bowers & Wilkins 802 Diamond and PMC's twenty.22 standmount. The bigger 802s show off the amp's low-end power and extension a treat, when Keith Jarrett's foot taps the

## DETAILS

**PRODUCT**  
Rega Elicit-R  
**PRICE**  
£1,598  
**ORIGIN**  
UK  
**WEIGHT**  
13kg  
**DIMENSIONS**  
(WxHxD)  
432 x 82 x 340mm  
**FEATURES**  
• Quoted power output:  
105W/8 ohms,  
162W/4 ohms  
• Line inputs: 5x  
RCA, direct, record,  
MM phono input  
• Outputs: 2x  
record, pre-amp  
• Solaris system  
remote control  
**DISTRIBUTOR**  
Rega Research  
**TELEPHONE**  
01702 333071  
**WEBSITE**  
rega.co.uk  
**REVIEWED**  
HFC 374

stage at the beginning of *Pt VII* on his *Testament* live album you can tell it's a big platform. The piano itself sounds as solid and precise in its character as one expects of a concert grand, a rigid yet reverberant instrument with serious mass. When a pianist of Jarrett's calibre is in the zone a system like this can deliver a totally enthralling result.

The PMC is a more sensibly priced speaker for the amp (£1,970), but provides a similarly gripping sound that while lower on finesse and bass extension does the all important job of showing the character of the music, the way it was played and recorded as well as that most critical quality; timing. You know exactly when things happen, when the stick hits the snare and the plectrum strikes the string, you may not get the full spatial picture nor the quietest of low-level sounds, but detail is not in short supply and there is musical thrill power in abundance.

This is a fast and agile amplifier that doesn't go out of its way to smooth over the cracks in a performance or recording, as a result some might find its presentation a little stark, but far more will revel in the clarity and transient precision of the sound. **JK**

## Hi-Fi Choice

### OUR VERDICT

#### SOUND QUALITY

★★★★★

#### VALUE FOR MONEY

★★★★★

#### BUILD QUALITY

★★★★★

#### FEATURES

★★★★★

#### OVERALL

★★★★★

**LIKE:** First class timing; plenty of power; massive musicality

**DISLIKE:** Finish is a little prosaic; lacks image depth

**WE SAY:** A revealing, precisely timed and musically sophisticated amplifier with plenty of power and socketry



# T+A

## *Caruso* Blu

### The Musical Miracle Cube



The new *Caruso* Blu sounds even better than its predecessor, looks even better, and boasts the very latest technology.

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## AVOKE

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## PORTABLE MUSIC PLAYER



# Astell&Kern AK120

**H**ere's Astell&Kern's latest update to the brilliant AK100 (HFC 370). The core memory has been upped from 32GB to 64GB, and if you add two 64GB micro SD cards you get a massive 192GB capacity, affording you more than a couple of thousand HD tracks-worth of space. But the main justification for the almost 100% increase in price from AK100 to AK120 (from £569 to £1,099) is the use of dual mono DACs.

The AK120 is a centimetre or so taller than its predecessor, marginally heavier, and the volume control has gained protective extensions from the casework so it has a more luxe 'dampened' physical feel in operation. Battery performance estimates range from 12 to 16 hours dependent upon the variables such as volume, screen and EQ use, and weight of the codec.

The major difference between the two machines in use is the addition of DSD file playback capability to the AK120. In the recently released v1.21 firmware there is also the ability to use it as a 24-bit/96kHz USB DAC.

### Sound quality

To test out that vital extra DAC and its effect on the analogue output of the AK120 I elect initially to listen to it hooked up to my reference system. The material used is HDtracks 24-bit/192kHz versions unless otherwise specified.

The opening of *Tres Hombres* by ZZ Top is a thrilling listen, the gapless

mode ensuring the seamless (in audio terms at least) segue from *Waitin' For The Bus* into *Jesus Just Left Chicago* sounds super smooth.

The sound signature reveals itself to be subtly different to the AK100, which is already a convincing component in this usage. As one might expect, the clearly identifiable enhancement of the dual mono converters gives a vast improvement in separation and detail. A listen to *Giorgio By Moroder* by Daft Punk reveals stereo synth placement that sounds three dimensional compared with the 'flat plane in front of you' rendition from the AK100.

The AK120 is able to extract the bassline from the maelstrom of Johnny Marr's *Upstarts* (24-bit/44.1kHz). It appears as if suspended in mid air in the stereo picture – quite a feat when even the deeper bitrate version is a sonic mess. The rendition of the track is even more enjoyable than on the AK100.

One of the joys of high resolution is the sense of real air and reverb around an acapella vocal. This makes the Yes-like *Interlude 1* from Alt J's *A Perfect Wave* (24-bit/96kHz) a great listen, the interlocking voices swooping around each other with a much greater sense of real space than the decidedly flat-sounding CD resolution version.

Convincing bass is something that both A&K players have in spades with their low frequency range extension, but Jackson Browne's *That Girl Could*

*Sing* from the *Hold Out* album is once again far superior on the AK120 with that thudding bassline and the gritty slide scudding over the top.

With its marginally louder output and 3 ohms output impedance (compared with the 22 ohms of the AK100), the AK120 should prove to be much better able to drive your headphones. A listening session with the Fostex TH900 cans confirms this, and reinforces the superior musicality of the player, too.

*Barangrill* from Joni's *For The Roses* is as delicate and intricate as it should be, while *Can't Slow Down* by Lionel Richie is as busy and as fizzy as it should be in its turn – the AK100 cannot match this! Even with 16-bit/44.1kHz material like *Baba O'Reilly* from *Who's Next* the same effect is noticeable.

Finally, that new USB DAC functionality works unfussily with a Mac – in no time via the OSX Decibel player I am sampling the delights of two new 24-bit/96kHz FLAC collections – those of Scott Walker and The Smiths. The results are simply astonishing – possibly even shading native AK120 FLAC playback – in both cases I am met with a fantastic deep bass and the creamy tones of the two lugubrious singers, more lifelike than ever. A joy.

In conclusion, it's difficult to call whether the best advice is to stick to the more affordable AK100, or to stretch your budget to acquire the AK120. In both cases you are getting the neutral, subtle 'Astell&Kern' sound, so an audition in your intended setting (headphones or amplified) is essential to make sure it is a sound that appeals to you. It is, however, impossible to deny the sound and the luxe appeal of the AK120. If, like me, you have picked up an HDtracks 24-bit/192kHz buying habit, this is one of the best ways of playing that stuff back, either on the move or at home. **PC**

### DETAILS

**PRODUCT**  
Astell&Kern AK120

**PRICE**  
£1,099

**ORIGIN**  
Korea

**WEIGHT**  
143g

**DIMENSIONS**  
(WxHxD)  
59 x 89 x 14mm

**FEATURES**  
• 24/192 FLAC, AIFF, WAV, and ALAC  
• APE, MP3, AAC, WMA and OGG playback  
• 64GB internal memory  
• 2 x microSD slots

**DISTRIBUTOR**  
Advanced MP3 Players

**TELEPHONE**  
0843 2896880

**WEBSITE**  
advancedmp3players.co.uk

**REVIEWED**  
HFC 375

## Hi-FiChoice

### OUR VERDICT

#### SOUND QUALITY

★★★★★

#### VALUE FOR MONEY

★★★★★

#### BUILD QUALITY

★★★★★

#### FEATURES

★★★★★

#### OVERALL

★★★★★

**LIKE:** The possibility of convenient DSD file handling

**DISLIKE:** A lot of money for a minor performance bump-up

**WE SAY:** If you have the budget, it makes sense to skip the original and leap up to the dual DAC heights



# Bowers & Wilkins

## P7

**THE LATEST AND** most expensive Bowers & Wilkins headphones are also the most desirable. There are two alternate cables, one for use with Apple portables with inline volume and play/pause control and another straight wire (without gain) for more discerning listeners. There is also a pouch and a 3.5mm-to-6.3mm jack adaptor. They weigh 290g and are foldable.

### Sound quality

Paired with an iPod and using the iPod cable, the sound is pretty open for a closed-back design and has reasonable if not terribly exciting bass, but it goes down a ways. These are revealing headphones that deliver extremely entertaining results with excellent definition across the board and far greater resolution of leading edges. They time really nicely and the bass has

shape and texture, the overall effect being to make the music more interesting and engaging.

I move over to a Russ Andrews headphone amplifier to get a better idea of the P7's capabilities. The amp does give a bit more dynamic punch, detail and low-end solidity, and opens up the mid and top nicely. Now it is quite easy to drift away with the music, especially Billy Gibbons' solo on *Snappie Kakkie* (ZZ Top – *Tejas*). This reveals the P7's strength with transients as well as their overall transparency, there is plenty of texture and tone to get your teeth into. This sounds like the result of a slight lift in the upper midband, but it works well with the gently boosted bass that only occasionally makes itself heard. It is easy to distinguish between high-quality streamers thanks to the P7's resolving qualities in both the spatial and timing



departments, but even easier to enjoy the likes of Gregory Porter giving it his all – *Liquid Spirit* is pretty remarkable when heard with headphones of this calibre.

The P7s are very good headphones for those who want to enjoy their music in the home and on the move. Coupled with their obvious ease of drive, they're a tempting proposition for anyone looking to up their musical enjoyment and their street cred. **JK**

### DETAILS

**PRICE**  
£330

**WEBSITE**  
bowers-wilkins.com

**REVIEWED**  
HFC 379

### OUR VERDICT

★★★★★

# Denon

## AH-D600



**WHEN YOU PUT** these phones on your head and tap the casing, the AD-H600s sound quite inert compared to many others. They're a pretty comfortable design that's not too heavy at 345g, and they have a relatively soft fit on the head. Better still, when those two 50mm 'Free Edge Nano Fibre' drivers have been run-in for a few days, they really begin to shine. What you get is a surprisingly detailed, insightful pair of headphones that dig deep into the music. So much so that they make a number of already excellent, but more expensive designs, sound quite average in some ways.

### Sound quality

Daft Punk's *Get Lucky* comes over with disconcerting clarity. Being closed back, bass is very tight and taut, yet they breathe better than many similar designs. The result is a

fun-packed, highly tuneful bassline that starts and stops on a sixpence, and pushes the song along with aplomb. The midband is a real ear opener; it is very detailed and proves great at unpicking the track's rhythm guitar work and slotting all the elements of it together beautifully.

Then there's the treble; this for me is where about 95 percent of 'phones stumble and fall. It's usually harsh and tizzy like a Grado or dull like a Beyer, but the Denons again prove consummately detailed and open. You would never call these dull headphones; with poor quality programme material and/or a poor source (ie MP3 from your computer),

they can be quite lacerative, but feed them with a decently recorded piece of music from a good headphone amp and they sound smooth and even yet intricate and delicate.

Though first impressions aren't overwhelmingly good, the more you use them the better they get. This helps you enjoy the AH-D600's powerful, punchy and musically engaging sound more – but it isn't all go and no show; there's loads of detail and they let you listen right into the mix like few others at or near the price. If you're looking for an enjoyable, but accurate pair of cans, these should go right to the very top of your shortlist. **DP**



### DETAILS

**PRICE**  
£350

**CONTACT**  
02890 279830

**WEBSITE**  
denon.co.uk

**REVIEWED**  
HFC 378

### OUR VERDICT

★★★★★

ANTHONY GALLO  
ACOUSTICS

ARCAM

ATLAS Cables

audiolab

AUDIOVECTOR

Bardaudio

B&W

Backyard

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CHORD  
COMPANY

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DENON

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exposure

GENELEC

Goldring

GRADO

IMAGE audio

Isotek

JVC

kaleidescape

KEF

kudos

LINN

Lumagen

marantz

MICHELL ENGINEERING

MISSION

MUSICAL FIDELITY

NAD

naim

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## Grado SR60i



**BOASTING AN OPEN-BACKED** design, the Grados have an unusual perforated plastic side to the earpad that gives the drivers space to breathe. This means they can leak noise and are sensitive to outside distractions. As a result, they are best suited to home use.

### Sound quality

Happily, though, they are a mighty fine listen indoors. They require relatively little amplifier power and put in an extremely consistent performance with a variety of music.

The most immediately apparent reason for this, is the extremely even tonal balance from top to bottom. The SR60i provide an impressive performance with the Kings of Leon's rather challenging *King Of The Rodeo* and extract midrange detail in particular, that nothing else in the group test in which they featured can find. When given something with rather better

recording quality like Martha Tilston's *Stags Bellow* or Stuart McCallum's *Vital Space* they simply dig deep into the mix.

Voices are beautifully handled and packed full of detail and emotion. Their relationship to the supporting instruments is convincing as well and the effect is never less than entirely believable. Bass response is also a very happy balance of weight and agility and it nicely complements the upper registers rather than competing with them.

With the complex low-end of Hybrid's *Every Word*, meanwhile, the SR60i find the detail and relay all of it while keeping the whole piece motoring along with a sense of timing and drive that is extremely likeable. This timing is easily appreciated with livelier pieces, but avoids adding any sense of relentlessness to more relaxed music.

They aren't perfect, though, and the soundstage is confined compared to



some rivals. They are cohesive and make good sense of the material and rarely sound anything other than accurate, but where Audio-Technica's ATH-AD500s manage to extend the sound beyond the earpad, the Grados are narrow.

Despite being very affordable at £105, their build, design and sound are all absolutely top notch and there's an assurance and cohesion that's rarely found at the price. **ES**

#### DETAILS

**PRICE**  
£105

**WEBSITE**  
gradolabs.com

**REVIEWED**  
HFC 369 Group Test

#### OUR VERDICT



## KEF M500

**THESE CANS ARE** KEF's first pair of over-ear headphones. The elegant brushed-aluminium frame incorporates what KEF calls the Smart Hinge, which cleverly rotates on two axis to make the M500s adaptable to different-sized heads and allows you to fold them up for storage. Beneath the ear pads sits the 40mm neodymium speaker driver, painstakingly tuned by KEF's audio engineers, so it's with high expectations that I place them on my ears for my first listen.

### Sound quality

From the outset I am impressed, and the KEFs go about producing music in a very enjoyable way. The frequency response feels well extended with a punchy and dynamic bass, and a nicely detailed treble that has a surprising sense of openness and sparkle for a closed-back design. As well as being easy on your own ears they are easy on

your neighbours', too. Sound leakage is kept to a minimum and makes the M500s suitable for travel on public transport with no need to worry about upsetting your fellow travellers.

Peter Gabriel's *Red Rain* sounds great. The expansive soundstage places vocals and instruments exactly where you expect to hear them, and the KEFs manage to create plenty of atmosphere. Move on to something more challenging like *Firestarter* by The Prodigy, and they demonstrate their forte for a heavier musical side and an impressive ability to handle more propulsive and energetic beats. Bass levels are deep without being overwhelming and they deliver a performance that's undeniably engaging and hard to fault.

Energetic beats are lapped up, demonstrating spectacular timing skills with any hip-hop, rap or dance genres. Hard to produce female vocals on more mellow tunes fare well too, and Joni Mitchell's *River* is



expressive with her voice sat convincingly in the mix. The track conjures all the atmosphere of an intimate jazz club with a tangible placement of instruments across the soundstage and Joni's voice anchored firmly to its central position. If there have to be criticisms, there is a slight lack of upper mid clarity affecting openness on some vocals, and a slightly over wide stereo presentation of instruments mixed to the extreme left or right channels.

Overall, though the M500s have a penchant for fast beats and can also handle more sedate musical tastes. **LD**

#### DETAILS

**PRICE**  
£250

**CONTACT**  
01622 672261

**WEBSITE**  
kef.com/uk

**REVIEWED**  
HFC 377

#### OUR VERDICT



## Sennheiser Momentum

**PART OF THE** wired range, the Momentums are closed-back, over ear models with a detachable cord. They are also the best piece of industrial design I can remember Sennheiser turning out in years. Features are unashamedly modern. The all-metal inline remote and microphone are fantastic to use and the clever hinged jack socket that gives you a choice of how the cable exits the socket is also a lovely touch (for non Apple devotees a standard lead is supplied). To keep them shiny, Sennheiser supplies a carry case, too. Behind the styling, the Momentums make use of a pair of relatively conventional 40mm dynamic drivers.

### Sound quality

The Momentums have a sonic balance that is neutral and impressively refined without ever being flat or boring. Much of this ability stems from the bass and how

it integrates with the rest of the frequency spectrum. The headphones have impressive low-end heft, but never dominate the performance, leaving the exceptional detail retrieval clearly apparent. They are able to find incidental parts of performances and weave them into a cohesive soundstage that extends considerably beyond the confines of the small enclosure. Even with large scale music, they stay believable.

The Momentums are sufficiently agile that the timing and energy they have with upbeat music is preserved and you will find that – whether you are in public or not – they will get your head nodding in sympathy. The only real complaint about their performance is that they are not an especially sensitive design and some portable devices may struggle to produce high volume levels.

Overall though, they are a fantastic product from Sennheiser and one that should win it some new friends. The



Momentums are a superb piece of industrial design that balance design flair with a musical and satisfying performance that is more than up to the task of listening at home as well as on the move. They certainly aren't cheap and there is no shortage of competition, but they are a cut above most of their 'lifestyle' brethren. If you want to look smart without compromising on sound quality, you need to give them an audition. **ES**

### DETAILS

**PRICE**  
£260

**WEBSITE**  
sennheiser.co.uk

**REVIEWED**  
HFC 372

### OUR VERDICT



## Sennheiser PX 360



**THE PX 360S** are one of the smaller designs from Sennheiser. As well as rotating flat, the earpads can be folded up into the headband to reduce space further. This gives them a rather unusual shape. The pads themselves are closed-back types that sit slightly awkwardly between covering the ear and sitting on it. That said they are comfortable in use. They employ a pair of Duofol diaphragms with the obligatory Neodymium magnets for drivers. Fit and finish are extremely good, but the cord is a little on the thin side and terminates at the righthand earpad, which is the opposite to most rivals.

### Sound quality

The most distinct impression you get from listening to the PX 360s is that the sound is similar to Grado's SR60i (on page 95), in that they are extremely cohesive from top to bottom with no frequency either recessed or over emphasised. This

gives the Kings of Leon's *King Of The Rodeo* an extremely listenable quality that finds the charm of the recording without exposing its weak points. The handling of vocals is extremely good and the PX 360s manage a truly stirring performance with Martha Tilston's *Stags Bellow*. Detail is excellent without tripping over into brightness or harshness, and the supporting instrumentation complements the performance well.

The soundstage is more confined than some designs, but there is still a convincing sense of the performance, as well as strong timing. There isn't quite the same bounce and attack to Hybrid's *Every Word* as the Grados manage, but they are still a very lively and assured performer that can still do justice to more relaxed pieces of music and not force them. The Sennheisers also have to yield to the Grado in terms of bass. There is plenty of it and it starts and stops commendably fast, but there isn't the



last ounce of detail that the Grados find in the same pieces.

The closed-back design and relatively compact dimensions of the PX 360s mean they are excellent to use on the move, though. The isolation is excellent and even in noisy spaces they do a good job of keeping the outside world at bay.

As an all-rounder then, they are a fine sounding design offering a great deal of real-world flexibility. **ES**

### DETAILS

**PRICE**  
£119

**WEBSITE**  
sennheiser.co.uk

**REVIEWED**  
HFC 369 Group Test

### OUR VERDICT

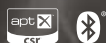




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C-I.I



C-I.I  
C-4.I



C-I.I



D-I



C-I.I  
D-I



D-I



C-4.I



# Clearaudio Performance DC

**T**his deck is more than just a pretty plinth; it sports a high-quality DC motor built into the chassis, similar to that used in Clearaudio's higher-end decks. It drives the inner platter by a short, taut, flat profile belt. This gives a nice tight grip on the rotation of the platter and makes for a relatively fast switch-on. The platter is a 40mm-thick black design; it's not resonant to the touch and is decently massy without putting the motor's life expectancy at risk.

The Performance DC package comes with the Clearaudio Clarify 9in tonearm (available separately for £950), which uses a silver-coloured woven carbon-fibre arm tube. It's tipped off at one end with an aluminium headshell, while at the other there's a neat counterweight that lets you dial in tracking force very accurately. The arm sports a magnetic bearing, which is claimed to eliminate bearing noise. It is fully adjustable, with vertical tracking angle, azimuth, (magnetically applied) anti-skating as cartridge downforce. Last but not least is Clearaudio's Virtuoso v2 MM cartridge (£650 separately). This is a high-end moving magnet. Endowed with a resonance-optimised ebony body, it sports an aluminium cantilever working with matched coils and high-efficiency magnets. It gives output voltage of 3.6mV (claimed), which is very healthy and tracks best at around 2.2g.

## Sound quality

The Performance DC gives a wide open window on the music, that's smooth, clean and detailed with just a bit of that lovely vinyl warmth that vinylistas love so much. It has a wonderfully quiet bearing that cuts rumble down to vanishingly low levels, yet digs out large amounts of detail from any record you care to play. And the matching arm and cartridge work with it, rather than against it, to extract a fantastic sound.

If you spend a lot of time with digital, you'll find this deck a rich sounding device – cue up a classic slice of eighties electronic pop like Jon and Vangelis' *I Hear You Now*, and it sets up a wide, secure soundstage that drops back nicely. Inside this, instruments are carried delicately, letting you hear the wonderfully fat sound of those early analogue synths. Smoother than a squashed fruit health drink, the deck pulls you into the mix, and delights by throwing out little bits of low-level detail that you'd just never get from a cheaper turntable. Although the deck is well able to mine lots of low-level information, you're never aware of it so doing, which means it doesn't sound analytical at all. Rather, the song lifts on and on, holding steady as the music draws to a crescendo; it's a stable-sounding platform alright.

Great as all this sounds, there is a slight flattening of the dynamics of the recording; there's a little less dynamic 'light and shade' than

non-packaged deck combinations such as the Michell GyroDec SE/ Tecnoarm/Audio-Technica OC9, which pinpoint the accenting of the music more assiduously. Rather than going for absolute transparency, the Clearaudio's first priority is to make a nice noise that you can enjoy.

Drop the stylus on Herbie Mann's great live rendition of *Summertime*, and the deck soon gets you into a great jazz groove. Once again, you bask in the sweet, refined sound and the lovely tonality – this is a million miles away from the shrill squawking that some cheaper turntables dish up. The flute sounds beautiful, the arm and cartridge tracking securely and the deck letting the music's flavour ooze out. It's a treat to hear, but in absolute terms, that big double bass sound is just a little softer and rounder than it could be, and this gives the track a richness that's a treat to experience, if not quite accurate. Again, some other rivals do it in a more neutral way, even if the end result isn't nicer to hear. That's the essence of this package then, it gives you a sound as smooth as Baileys' Irish Cream and just as intoxicating – taking you into another world, miles from the fussiness of digital. **DP**

## DETAILS

**PRODUCT**  
Clearaudio  
Performance DC

**PRICE**  
£2,495

**ORIGIN**  
Germany

**WEIGHT**  
11.5kg

**DIMENSIONS**  
(WxHxD)  
420 x 330 x 130mm

**FEATURES**  
• Aluminium/wood  
fibre sandwich  
plinth  
• Ceramic magnetic  
main bearing  
• DC turntable  
motor  
• Carbon-fibre  
weave tonearm  
• High output MM  
cartridge bundled

**DISTRIBUTOR**  
Sound Foundations

**TELEPHONE**  
01276 501392

**WEBSITE**  
soundfoundations.  
co.uk

**REVIEWED**  
HFC 377

## Hi-Fi Choice

### OUR VERDICT

#### SOUND QUALITY

★★★★★

#### VALUE FOR MONEY

★★★★★

#### BUILD QUALITY

★★★★★

#### FEATURES

★★★★★

#### OVERALL

★★★★★

**LIKE:** Beautiful build; sweet, smooth sound; easy set-up

**DISLIKE:** Soft low bass; slight dynamic compression

**WESAY:** Lovely package giving fine performance plus convenience



## ISOkinetik Modular 1.5

ISOkinetik's Modular 1.5 turntable looks to be one hell of a record player, but how does it sound? Time to take it for a spin

**I**SOkinetik first earned an excellent reputation for its enhancements and upgrades to existing audio products, in particular record decks. Its design philosophy is simple: "If it sounds better, it is better!". Later, it went on to produce its own turntable, the Modular One. Now it has added a second turntable to its range – the Modular 1.5, which is also available as an upgrade to the Modular One.

The Modular 1.5 is designed to be fully customisable and upgradable so that it can be built according to the user's budget and taste. It can be purchased with a full range of enhancements and upgrades fitted, or it can be supplied as an entry-level unit, which can then be upgraded as

funds permit. It can be supplied on its own or complete with a Jelco or an OEM Rega arm.

The black plinth looks superb and is CNC machined from highly polished 20mm-thick billet acrylic. The plinth is essentially the same as the Modular One turntable and is upgraded to the Modular 1.5 by adding the M1.5 sub-plinth, which is also made from 20mm-thick acrylic, and supported by four dense absorbothane anti-vibration pads. The feet are machined from Delrin and also have absorbothane anti-vibration pads built into them. Absorbothane is great at absorbing vibrations and has superb anti-slip properties. It feels quite sticky and adheres firmly to smooth surfaces, making the unit difficult to move.

### DETAILS

**PRODUCT**  
ISOkinetik  
Modular 1.5

**PRICE**  
£849

**ORIGIN**  
UK

**FEATURES**  
● Upgradable design  
● Removable tonearm transfer plate

**DISTRIBUTOR**  
ISOkinetik

**TELEPHONE**  
0208 2418890

**WEBSITE**  
[isokinetik.co.uk](http://isokinetik.co.uk)

**REVIEWED**  
HFC 371

The turntable bearing assembly is made from phosphor-bronze and incorporates a ceramic ball. It is fitted to an aluminium and ground-steel sub-platter, which is engineered to exacting tolerances with 0.001mm concentricity between axle and hub.

A high-quality asynchronous motor spins the platter at either 33rpm or 45rpm. Like many turntables in its class, the speed is changed by moving the drive belt on the pulley. However, better results are achieved by using the ISOdrive quadrature-quartz speed generator turntable motor drive system as an upgrade to bring greater pitch stability and speed accuracy, as well as push button speed change.

One of the features of the design that I find especially useful when reviewing audio equipment is the tonearm transfer plate. This is a removable rectangular plate that's just 10mm thick and fitted neatly into the plinth and secured by four Allen bolts. This allows the user to fit almost any tonearm. It also facilitates the comparison of various combinations of tonearm and cartridge which, once mounted on a transfer plate, are simply dropped into place. Changing a tonearm that has a completely different mounting arrangement simply involves obtaining an additional tonearm plate from ISOkinetik (which can be pre-drilled as



required), meaning that no additional modification to your precious turntable is necessary.

The basic model is supplied with a 12mm diamond-polished acrylic platter, which is said to have a neutral character. Upgrades include a 25mm-thick acrylic platter, or platters made from Delrin or ply materials, along with a number of colour options.

The model reviewed here has all the upgrades fitted, including the ISOdek S1 clear acrylic isolation platform, the ISOsub GT2 S sub-platter, the 25mm clear acrylic platter and the ISOdrive off-board turntable power supply. The ceramic ball in the bearing assembly has also been upgraded with the ISObear Ruby Sapphire bearing ball. I fit my own Kiseki Blue NOS moving coil cartridge into the arm.

The ISOdrive is an external power supply that takes your noisy 240V AC mains, converts it to a 24V DC, uses this to power a quartz oscillator to produce switchable 50Hz or 67.5Hz and then steps the result up to 115V AC to run the synchronous motor. The drive belt can then be left on the upper 33rpm pulley as depressing the button on the front of the ISOdrive changes the indicator LED from red to green and increases the oscillator frequency from 50Hz to 67.5Hz, thus increasing the turntable rotation to 45rpm. As with all the upgrades, the ISOdrive can be fitted later to the base model turntable by swapping a little printed circuit board.

As previously mentioned, the turntable is beautifully finished and it is very apparent that everything has been manufactured to an extremely high standard. The style is simple and uncomplicated and looks modern and elegant with just the right use of black and transparent acrylic with splashes of silver aluminium around the motor pulley assembly. The turntable is no lightweight, weighing in at around 10.5kg, which rises to 13.5kg when you add the ISOdek isolation platform.

## Sound quality

As it is relatively easy to install the M1.5 sub-plinth upgrade onto the Modular One turntable, I am able to make direct comparisons between the two options.

First to be rotated is an excellent recording of Vivaldi's *12 Concerti, Op.7* with Salvatore Accardo, Heinz Holliger and I Musici (Philips 2 LP boxed set 6700 100). The only thing I can say is: "Wow"! The first thing to hit me is the imaging – the instruments' positions are crystal clear. There is also far more detail apparent in the quieter sections. The sheer, stunning realism of the

performance is superb and extremely captivating, making the music never less than completely compelling.

Because I have a feeling that the sub-plinth is doing a great job of absorbing and isolating vibrations from the main plinth, I decide to try out something with loads of bass – some J S Bach organ music! My recording of Michael Murray playing Bach's *Fantasia and Fugue in G minor* on Telarc DG-10049 fits the bill perfectly. The bass reveals itself to be super-tight, but not overly restrained. The overall performance feels effortless and even when my woofers are blowing a gentle breeze during the crescendos, my system feels like it has a lot more to give.

Next up for a change of pace I decide to give the M1.5 a taste of jazz. I opt for a recent addition to my collection, which is one of the better recordings of Miles Davis' *Kind of Blue* on CBS 62066 – the 1960 stereo issue from

## The first thing to hit me is the imaging – the instruments are crystal clear

Columbia Broadcasting Systems. Although this stereo release is guilty of playing 'sax on the left, trumpet in the middle and drums on the right', it nevertheless is a fantastic analogue recording that has huge presence and dynamics. Once again, the M1.5 reveals all of the innate beauty of the recording. In particular, the hi-hat on *All Blues* (or "All Blue" as it's printed on the disc label) is extremely clear and crisp – something that is very lacking on the CD and digital versions I have heard of this recording, I might add. In fact, the top end shows a noticeable improvement with the M1.5 when compared with the Modular One and this is something I was not expecting to discover. Also, the bass is tight and in perfect proportion.

Changing pace a touch, Laurent Garnier's *Tales of a Kleptomaniac* is similarly rendered in an effortless fashion. In particular, the massive techno bass achieves incredible control and tightness without any sense of being unnecessarily restrained. In fact, when I move from my listening room to my study to make a few notes, I can hear the metal filing cabinet in the study vibrating in sympathy with the heavy bass beats emanating from the other room.

As with any other recordings I throw the Modular 1.5's way, the top end is transparent, open and in perfect

proportion with the rest of the music. Switching to the Mobile Fidelity Sound Lab MFSL 1-107 half-cut master recording of *Money* from Pink Floyd's *The Dark Side Of The Moon* (the term 'half-cut' refers to the master disc being cut at half speed and not, as far as I'm aware, the alcoholic state of the recording engineer) produces a very musical bass guitar, while the infamous cash registers in the opening section glitter with clarity. The vocals, meanwhile, are clear and their slight raspiness is perfectly reproduced.

Finishing off with a full orchestra – Rachmaninov's *Piano Concerto No. 2* played by Dmitri Alexeev and the RPO on EMI Eminence EMX 2042 – is rendered in all its splendour. Impressively, the piano is never swamped by the orchestra. Excellent front-to-back imaging is also very evident with this recording and the deck, tonearm and cartridge are clearly working together well in order to unpick the complexities of the music and reproduce the subtle nuances impeccably well.

All of my reservations about the use of absorbothane as an absorbing and damping material because of its tacky feel, are completely dispelled after my listening trials (however, its stickiness can still be a bit of a pain when attempting to move the unit). The Modular 1.5 builds on the Modular One (literally) and gives a performance that lives up to its elegant and refined appearance and styling. A series of excellent features, such as the tonearm transfer plate, make modification and upgrade an absolute breeze. Attention to detail in the design and manufacturing processes ensures that all of the individual elements of the unit and its upgrades blend together perfectly.

The Modular 1.5 is a top-class performer that is good value for money. Now the company is promising a Modular Two turntable will follow – watch this space! **NR**

## Hi-Fi Choice

### OUR VERDICT

#### SOUND QUALITY

★★★★★

#### VALUE FOR MONEY

★★★★★

#### BUILD QUALITY

★★★★★

#### FEATURES

★★★★★

#### OVERALL

★★★★★

**LIKE:** Build quality; tonearm transfer plate; well-controlled bass; superb imaging

**DISLIKE:** Inherent 'stickiness' of feet makes it difficult to move

**WE SAY:** Top quality turntable that delivers looks and sound quality

A beautiful disc spinner that's been produced to an extremely high standard



# Origin Live Aurora Mk3

**T**he main chassis of the Aurora comes prefitted with an armboard that is drilled for both Origin Live/old-type Rega single-point and modern Rega three-point fixings, so it covers many bases. Obviously, other armboard templates are available – you just need to specify the right one to your dealer before you hand over your cash.

The rest of the deck comprises the platter and the motor. Before the former is fitted, the bearing hub has to be dropped down into the recess on the chassis – the former is said to be a new type designed for faster energy transmission and of lower friction than before. The new, thicker platter is made of a visually attractive semi-translucent acrylic material. On to this sits the company's excellent 'upgrade platter mat', that's a fine tweak for other decks, too.

Finally, the motor slots into the rear left chassis recess, and the belt is attached. Origin Live says the belt is made from a new material, hand finished for better quality. The motor unit itself is surprisingly large, and the latest Mk3 Aurora is said to benefit from additional damping.

Speed control is easily electronically switched between 33rpm and 45rpm (78rpm is available on request); juice comes from a low-noise regulated power supply. Finally, the Aurora has a 12in tonearm mounting option (£260) should you wish to use geometrically correct pick-up arms,

and also the option of running dual armboards (£323) instead of just the one. The arm fitted to the test sample is the company's £450 Onyx.

## Sound quality

Not entirely unexpectedly perhaps, the Aurora Mk3 is a fine-sounding turntable, one that very much has an Origin Live house sound – which means it balances the natural, warm and cossetting ambience of vinyl with a good deal of insight and grip. For this reason, it works nicely with a wide range of programme material. Slip on some cool jazz from Herbie Mann and all that's good about this deck shines through. It manages to scythe through the noise on my ageing LP, and dig deep into the music. The soundstage is wide, proving this to be a spacious and enveloping performer.

The Origin Live lets the recording's rhythm ebb and flow naturally. I can hear the beautiful phrasing of Mann's flute work, shuffling around and delicately accenting the music. It's this sort of subtlety that sorts out the vinyl spinning wheat from the chaff, and here this turntable does well.

Another nice aspect is its tonality; it is just a little more sumptuous and soft sounding than many rivals – just enough to make it a better match for often hard-sounding budget tonearms. Together with the Alliance, it makes for an ideal partnership – *Snowflake* from Kate Bush is a stunning-sounding modern

recording, contrasting Bush's icy cool voice with wonderfully rich and vibrant piano work. This deck captures the tonal balance very well and comes close to the 24/96 WAV file played through a high-end streamer, for example. It shows that the deck doesn't over egg the pudding, making things coloured, but neither is it unduly bright.

This natural, well-judged tonality allies to a very organic sense of rhythm making this a deck that can take on anything.

Often, lesser vinyl spinners can sound a little opaque and indistinct, but not so with my audiophile vinyl reissue of Stravinsky's *Firebird Suite*. The turntable catches the natural flow of the music, without thrusting detail out at the listener as if it needs to prove a point. Given the modest price of the tonearm I am very impressed, but a quick swap to a high-end Origin Live Illustrious reveals that the deck has even more to give, with lots more detail, depth and insight.

It's very hard to think what else you could ask of this £999 turntable; its build is excellent at the price, its sonic performance is simply superb and there's certainly nothing wrong with its looks either. **DP**

## DETAILS

**PRODUCT**  
Origin Live Aurora Mk3

**PRICE**  
£999

**ORIGIN**  
UK

**WEIGHT**  
10.5kg

**DIMENSIONS**  
(WxHxD)  
450 x 380 x 130mm

## FEATURES

- Acrylic/metal chassis
- Belt drive
- External power supply
- Acrylic platter

**DISTRIBUTOR**  
Origin Live

**TELEPHONE**  
02380 578877

**WEBSITE**  
originlive.com

**REVIEWED**  
HFC 373

## Hi-Fi Choice

### OUR VERDICT

#### SOUND QUALITY

★★★★★

#### VALUE FOR MONEY

★★★★★

#### BUILD QUALITY

★★★★★

#### FEATURES

★★★★★

#### OVERALL

★★★★★

**LIKE:** Natural, open and three-dimensional sound; organic rhythms; fine dynamics

**DISLIKE:** Fiddlier to set up than Rega and Pro-Ject price rivals

**WE SAY:** Excellent value mid-price turntable with high-quality sound

★★★★★



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# Pro-Ject RPM 1.3 Genie

**T**here's one problem with non-suspended decks, which is that the plinth works as a sound absorption board, capturing the vibration from the speakers and sending it through the platter and into the stylus. A good way of avoiding this is to go with a skeletal design such as the Genie, which has a smaller surface area and is thus less prone to airborne disturbance. Another nice feature is that the motor sits separately from the main chassis, meaning it's only the belt that contacts the platter directly – which should cut down noise dramatically, which is just as well because the supplied motor isn't the quietest I've ever come across.

In other respects, the Pro-Ject is a conventional belt-drive deck with a decent Pro-Ject 8.6 S-shaped aluminium tonearm – although the bundled Ortofon 2M Red cartridge is a nice touch, and unexpected at this price point. It's decently built at the price, although the MDF chassis has a definite lightness to it. Still you get the feeling that costs have been cut very intelligently, without too many sacrifices being made.

Setting up is a fiddlier process than some, and you have to take care to get the motor nicely centred in its recess, making sure that it doesn't touch the deck's chassis. The arm feels nice and the supplied cartridge is pre-fitted and well aligned, which makes life easier.

## Sound quality

This latest Genie proves a very decent performer at the price, and although not exceptional in any particular way, it doesn't have any obvious weak points that drag it down either. This is in marked contrast to some at this price point! Basically it's a bright, crisp, spry sounding deck, giving a surprisingly stable sound that doesn't punish piano music – always a great test of a turntable's speed accuracy. Debussy's *The Sunken Cathedral* shows that the deck can keep its cool with testy programme material, giving a nicely musical sound even on high modulated pieces.

Moving to some modern electronics in the shape of Kraftwerk's excellent *Tour De France*, and again the Genie magically makes for the rhythmic heart of the music, pushing the groove along with aplomb. Compared



## DETAILS

**PRODUCT**  
Pro-Ject RPM 1.3 Genie

**PRICE**  
£235

**ORIGIN**  
Czech Republic/  
Slovakia

**WEIGHT**  
3.3kg

**DIMENSIONS**  
(WxHxD)  
380 x 115 x 350mm

**FEATURES**  
• 33 and 45rpm  
• Skeletal chassis  
• Decoupled motor  
• Ortofon 2M Red MM supplied

**DISTRIBUTOR**  
Henley Designs

**TELEPHONE**  
01235 511166

**WEBSITE**  
henleydesigns.co.uk

**REVIEWED**  
HFC 372 Group Test

with pricier reference decks there is quite a lot of bass missing, this Pro-Ject seems to dwell more on the midband where it is most comfortable, but what low end it does reveal is clean and taut with absolutely no slurring or unwanted overhang. It is a confident and assured performance, sticking to what it does best.

REM's *Near Wild Heaven* is plenty of fun too, the deck sets up an open and quite wide soundstage – a feat that many budget CD players wouldn't be able to pull off – inside which is a wealth of detail. Those ringing Rickenbacker guitars sound nicely crunchy and real, but don't ever fall into distortion, while vocals are smooth and direct. There is a sense of a musical event, something that not every deck at this price delivers. Moving to some mellow jazz in the shape of Herbie Hancock's *Maiden Voyage*, and it is only here that the Genie doesn't seduce quite so much. It is a nice enough listen, but the lack of bass makes the track feel a little lightweight, and the lack of subtlety up top makes cymbals a little coarse. Overall, it's a very strong performance given its price. **DP**

## Hi-Fi Choice

### OUR VERDICT

**SOUND QUALITY**  
★★★★★ **LIKE:** Expansive, musical sound; fine tonearm and superb cartridge

**VALUE FOR MONEY**  
★★★★★ **DISLIKE:** Rather fiddly to set up

**BUILD QUALITY**  
★★★★★ **WE SAY:** Excellent starter deck, especially if you're the type that likes to tweak

**FEATURES**  
★★★★★

### OVERALL





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# Rega RP1

**I**f you were to distil down the essential elements of what makes up the perfect budget turntable, this is pretty much what you'd end up with. The RP1 is simplicity itself, but don't think for a minute that no thought has gone into the design. Basically, it's a slab of MDF, nicely painted and finished, with a hole drilled in the middle for the main bearing. The AC synchronous motor also bolts in from underneath, and there's the fine Rega RB101 tonearm affixed on the other side. This is, of course, the blueprint for the more expensive Rega designs, but money has been saved simply by doing things a little less fastidiously. Still, the Rega feels well finished and nicely screwed together.

As per the classic Rega mould, speed selection is done by moving the belt on the two-step pulley. It's cheap and highly effective, but many won't like the faffing around – and it feels crude compared to the way it's done on similarly priced offerings that have a dedicated button for this purpose.

The turntable comes fitted with a pre-aligned Rega Carbon cartridge, so set up is incredibly easy. It's not quite as 'plug and play' as some, but it's still pretty simple. The RP1 sports a black felt mat and there are a number of colour choices for this – and the deck itself.

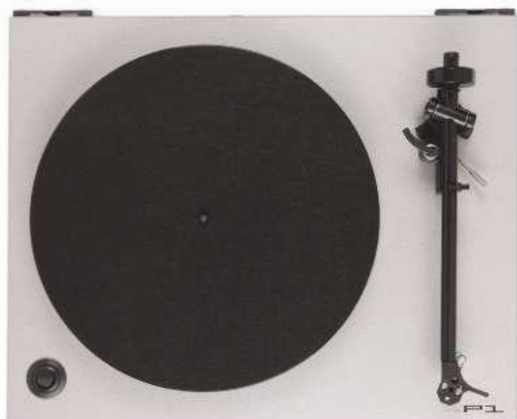
## Sound quality

Despite being very much a budget offering, the RP1 sounds distinctively

Rega – which can only be a good thing. Compared with many at this price point, there is more of a sense of what is actually going on in the record, rather than what the turntable is turning the original recording into.

This package is well able to impart the power and grip of the bass guitar in REM's *Near Wild Heaven*, for example, carrying the phrasing far better than most. It is also exceptionally good rhythmically, giving a sense of musical flow and progression to the song where others tend to sound a touch floaty and rather unstructured.

Its midband is sufficiently neutral for the listener to really hear into the recorded acoustic, and this makes for better depth perspective than most, even if the left-to-right soundstage isn't quite as expansive as the Pro-Ject RPM 1.3 Genie (reviewed



## DETAILS

**PRODUCT**  
Rega RP1

**PRICE**  
£230

**ORIGIN**  
UK

**WEIGHT**  
4.2kg

**DIMENSIONS**  
(WxHxD)  
450 x 120 x 360mm

**FEATURES**  
• 33 and 45rpm  
• Phenolic resin platter  
• Rega RB101 tonearm  
• Rega Carbon MM supplied

**DISTRIBUTOR**  
Rega Research

**WEBSITE**  
rega.co.uk

**REVIEWED**  
HFC 372 Group Test

on page 105). Tonally the baby Rega doesn't stray too far from the company's 'house sound', which is to say quite lean yet smooth – Kraftwerk's *Tour de France* isn't quite as sumptuous as it sounds on the Genie, but still sounds nicely balanced and even, too.

Moving back to the rock of REM and the RP1 feels in its element, giving a crisp, dry, stable sound without any nasties that certain other decks are guilty of. Really rather detailed, it carries the vocals very sensitively, and really catches the mood of the music well.

Its bass is excellent; not as strong as Audio-Technic's AT-LP1240-USB, perhaps, but supple and tuneful nonetheless. It shows the deck's fine timing off to great effect, just as it should be. It is only on Herbie Hancock's *Maiden Voyage* that it's lack of warmth or romance sound a tad too matter of fact. Having said that, it doesn't lose vast tracts of detail that rivals tend to simply gloss over. Overall, the Rega RP1 is an impressive turntable – it might not be quite as warm or wide as the Pro-Ject Genie, but it still turns out to be a real class act. **DP**

## Hi-Fi Choice

### OUR VERDICT

#### SOUND QUALITY



**LIKE:** Smooth, pacey sound; decent finish; excellent arm; nice cartridge

#### VALUE FOR MONEY



**DISLIKE:** Overall it feels a lot cheaper than the Rega RP2

#### BUILD QUALITY



#### FEATURES



**WE SAY:** A fantastic starter turntable package. Rega hasn't lost its touch

#### OVERALL



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## Nagaoka MP-150



**THE MP-150 IS** finished in a very particular shade of green that rather makes it look like it has dropped through a hole in time from 1976, but the specification including the carbon fibre reinforced body is right up to date. Nagaoka also provides some useful tools to make set up a breeze.

Installing the MP-150 is also relatively simple. The mounts are unthreaded, but the relatively big body is easy to mount and install and there is nothing especially tricky about the tracking and alignment.

### DETAILS

**PRICE**  
£229

**TYPE**  
Magnetodynamic  
Permalloy

**WEBSITE**  
nagaoka.co.jp

**REVIEWED**  
HFC 375 Group Test

### OUR VERDICT



### Sound quality.

The Nagaoka has a number of characteristics that impress right from the outset, which suggest that the company's recent absence from the market has been our loss. The other interesting aspect of the performance is that there is practically no variation in the traits that it demonstrates across our two test turntables. The MP-150 manages

to combine a powerful and lively sound when required with impressive subtlety when it isn't. The performance with Little Feat's *Rock And Roll Doctor* is genuinely entertaining with tremendous drive and excitement coupled with an exceptionally sweet top end that is completely free from both brightness and aggression.

With the more refined Ray Charles' *Sinner's Prayer* or Cinematic Orchestra's *All That You Are* it retains a sense of agility and control, but doesn't force the slower moments or bring unwanted scale to the performances. The soundstage is beautifully composed and very easy to follow. The handling of voices and instruments is rarely less than unflinchingly believable as well. The Nagaoka is commendably unaffected by surface noise and these features all combine to give a sense of considerable dynamic range. With the more unconventional Boards of



Canada recording of *Reach For The Dead*, the MP-150 slightly softens some of the performance taking some of the intensity away, but equally it maintains the expansive soundstage and excellent panning that the piece requires to shine. If I am being very picky, it is probably fair to say that the Nagaoka can't find some of the fine detail that the very best can extract, but then few can match the engaging musicality that the MP-150 brings to such a wide variety of music.

Take a look at all of these attributes as a whole and the result is a very compelling cartridge that seems to be happy in a variety of setups. **ES**

## Ortofon 2M Blue

**THE DISTINCTIVE DESIGN** of the 2M range comes courtesy of a partnership with Møller Jensen Design and is intended to mimic the cut diamond of the stylus.

The 2M Blue makes use of bespoke split pole pins, which Ortofon claims give the moving magnet offering a flat frequency response more in keeping with a moving coil design.

The finish is more than acceptable for the price and the excellent packaging and supplied tools (it comes with a stylus gauge) are also extremely good. The body is threaded and extremely easy to fit and align and the 2M Blue is not a difficult cartridge to accommodate.

### Sound quality

The Ortofon immediately shows that it has a seriously impressive output level that should allow all but the most feeble phono stages to deliver a healthy volume. The performance is clear and open with an impressive

sense of drive and attack to it. The 2M Blue powers through Little Feat's *Rock And Roll Doctor* and marries agility and speed with impressive tonality. Across a variety of records the performance with voices is quite superb and the Ortofon goes about arranging everything in a clear and easy to follow soundstage.

The 2M Blue also manages to adjust its scale between small and intimate and vast easily and convincingly. The handling of surface noise is commendably good, too and it is able to deal with a wide variety of material without leaving you feeling short changed with any of it.

The limitations of the Ortofon are commendably slight by comparison. When listened to in competition with the Nagaoka (below), the Ortofon manages to keep pace with the more expensive cartridge over an impressive range of material. When the going gets very complex though, the 2M Blue can lose some of the fine



detail that the Nagaoka can dig out of the mix. In comparison with the MP-150, there can be a very slight lack of warmth and emotion – although this is something a suitable phono stage might sort out.

All things considered, as one of the cheaper cartridges around, there is a great deal to like about the Ortofon. This is a well built and – thanks to the supplied tools – easy to install cartridge that offers a very capable sonic performance and the high regard this cartridge is held in seems entirely justified. **ES**

### DETAILS

**PRICE**  
£170

**TYPE**  
Moving magnet

**WEBSITE**  
ortofon.com/home

**REVIEWED**  
HFC 375 Group Test

### OUR VERDICT





## Leema Acoustics Essentials Phono

**THE LITTLE LEEMA** supports moving magnet and moving coil cartridges, and can be switched between the two settings via two rather hard-to-adjust rear panel switches. There are no other controls and no loading adjustments, and the only front panel feature beyond the name is a single blue LED. Black and silver finishes are available.

### Sound quality

In our blind listening test, the panel is universally enthusiastic about the Essentials and find much to like about its music-making ability. The most significant aspect is that it puts in a consistently strong performance with all types of music.

Much of this seems to be down to the handling of the frequency extremes. The Leema has an open, airy and well-extended top end that gives recordings space to breathe. At

the low end, it consistently impresses with its bass. It combines impressive low-end heft with the sort of fine details that make the reproduction of a piece more convincing. This means the Leema has a sense of timing and control that makes it easy to listen to, if not quite an effortless rhythm king.

In terms of tonality, it proves equally effective, and panelists are again impressed at how even-handed it is, along with the impressive sense of decay it gives to certain notes. The low noise floor and impressive microdynamics are also remarked upon, and while the soundstage isn't felt to be the best, it is consistently good. Listeners also like the way that the Leema can flatter and work with poorer recordings without smoothing off or reducing the dynamics of better pieces. Given that not all vinyl is 'audiophile', this is a useful attribute.



Criticisms are slight. There's a sense that the Essentials might be a little too civilised for its own good, and that every now and again, it could do with being a bit more effusive and enthusiastic. Whether this would come at the cost of the more positive qualities of its performance is hard to say, however.

Overall, the little Leema shows a sufficiently comprehensive range of abilities to handle a variety of music in an even-handed way. It's an all rounder that will work well in the context of quite varied systems. Throw in the solid build and you have an impressive bit of kit. **ES**



### DETAILS

**PRICE**  
£495

**WEBSITE**  
leema-acoustics.com

**REVIEWED**  
HFC 367 Group Test

### OUR VERDICT



## Pro-Ject Phono Box RS



**THIS IS ONE** of the best specified phono stages I have ever seen for under £1,000. It's effectively a moving magnet and moving coil-capable model with adjustable loading and gain settings. This bald description barely does justice to the flexibility of the RS, though. Input impedance is fully adjustable via the front panel knob, which effectively allows infinite adjustment and there are additional front panel settings for mute and gain.

Around the back, you can adjust the input capacitance and decide between using RCA or XLR connections.

### Sound quality

This is an exceptionally quiet design, even over RCA and the gain settings should be sufficient for even the feeblest of cartridges. The overall sonic balance is commendably neutral, but it's able to accurately

reproduce the behaviour of the turntable connected to it. The performance from a Rega RP6 is explicit and features the exceptional timing that the deck is renowned for, while a Michell GyroDec has the trademark stunning soundstage and more three-dimensional bass.

The overall effect is that the Pro-Ject is extremely faithful to the source and the record. Detail extraction is excellent and there is a genuine sense of depth and realism to recordings. This transparency will highlight some of the flaws in less pristine records, but considering how good the RS can be with good recordings, this is

relatively benign. Bass response is good too and it can generally produce deep and detailed bass with no trace of bloat or blossom.

It might be less rhythmically engaging than some, but it is still capable of getting the head nodding with uptempo material.

This is a serious bit of kit for the asking price, and there is no question that Pro-Ject has pulled out all the stops to produce it. It also manages to feel special to use in a way that very few pieces of kit under £1,000 can do. If the rest of the RS range is as capable as this, I can't wait to get my hands on them. **ES**



### DETAILS

**PRICE**  
£600

**WEBSITE**  
henleydesigns.co.uk

**REVIEWED**  
HFC 368

### OUR VERDICT





Apprentice MM  
Phono stage



SP2 floor standing  
Speakers - gloss



MC3 reference  
Phono stage



Apprentice TT



# TALK

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### Sound quality

The first thing I notice is a distinct lack of any background noise. Not that there was any great amount

before: in fact, its presence before was barely noticeable, but its absence once it's gone is apparent. The noise on a rip of Keith Jarrett's *The Koln Concert* emerges clearly from the soundstage in which the faulty piano rightly assumes all three of its dimensions. It seems that individual notes within trills have greater individuality and definition. They also show more of the piano's 'jangly' timbre: their note shape has crystalline relief, which helps emphasise the poor state of the instrument. This openness subjectively widens the spectral scope of the recording, bringing out playing at both extremes of the keyboard with greater clarity and detail – even though Jarrett concentrated his playing during the event to the instrument's midrange. This enhanced clarity also benefits micro and macro dynamic contrasts that



give the portrayal of his playing a more natural and emotive feel.

The major benefit of the Dectet is that it seems to do absolutely nothing deleterious to the dynamic compass of the system: the streamer, DAC and power amplifier retain all the dynamic expression they had before being connected to the unit. In fact, the system ultimately sounds more dynamically charged in micro and macro terms than it had before, most likely as a result of the noise floor being lowered. Unlike most filtered power strip designs, I think this inexpensive device is definitely worth a test run in your system. **MS**



### DETAILS

**PRICE**  
£385

**CONTACT**  
07738 007776

**WEBSITE**  
signaturesystems.co.uk

**REVIEWED**  
HFC 376

### OUR VERDICT



## van den Hul The Wave/CS-122 Hybrid



### DETAILS

**PRICE**  
The Wave: £130/m  
CS-122: £20/m

**WEBSITE**  
vandenhul.com

**REVIEWED**  
HFC 374 Group Test

### OUR VERDICT



**THE WAVE INTERCONNECT** is a silver-plated, copper cable featuring a "massive" 0.9mm central conductor of oxygen-free copper. A specially foamed dielectric insulation material is said to minimise high-frequency signal attenuation. The outer and inner layer are made of the same material as the central conductor, which is described as a "triple shield" said to aid interference suppression.

The CS-122 Hybrid is an updated version of one of vdH's classic speaker cables, and sports two conductors made of 147 strands of 0.16mm diameter, high-purity, matched-crystal oxygen-free copper with a very dense pure-silver coating, alongside a carbon saturated layer that is said to improve the sound. The jacket on both cables is made of Hülliflex.

### Sound quality

From the opening bars of Beethoven's *Quartet in C minor*, it is obvious that these are special. The sound hangs back from the speakers and dissolves into the room, rather than appearing to come from two points in space. The transparency is superb, but it isn't at the expense of musicality, as the vdH loom has a wonderfully mellifluous quality to it that sees the music ebbing and flowing in a seductive and arresting manner.

Paul Simon's *Graceland* is proof positive of the way these cables are able to let the singer's real intentions flood out – every vocal inflection is carried beautifully, giving a mesmeric quality to the music. Sure, all the detail is there, but the bigger picture isn't lost in the process of rendering it.



Vocals are expressive and dynamic, and this is set over a backing that suddenly takes on an urgent, snappy quality to it – when previously the musicians seem to just be going through the motions. It is amazing how the same beats sound so different, as if they've been set free.

The overall effect, then, is of an absolutely stellar cable combination and one that's an essential audition for anyone that's in the market for such a thing. The great thing is that it's not really all that characterful, it's just very unobtrusive and lets the music's true flavour come flooding out and that's what matters. **DP**





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# The ultimate Beatles rarity?

This unique copy of *The White Album*, under the hammer at Bonhams, is for Fab Four fans with the fattest of wallets. **Simon Berkovitch** investigates

**I**n the complicated world of obsessive Fab Four collecting, a copy of *The Beatles* – universally known as *The White Album* for obvious reasons – has surfaced that even has vinyl experts who know every matrix number (see opposite page) and every worldwide variant scratching their mop tops.

Potentially a one-off, this copy of the classic LP is appearing in the Bonhams Entertainment Memorabilia sale in London's well-heeled Knightsbridge this December and is expected to command a very high price indeed. It's one that ticks all the right boxes for super-collectors – original pressing, incredibly low edition number, a potential EMI or even Beatles connection – and then throws a unique curveball into the mix.

So, just what makes this copy of *The White Album* so special that it's giving Beatlesologists sleepless nights? To understand this mega-rarity better, a magical history tour is required...

## Get Back

Originally released in 1968, *The White Album* was the group's ninth, a two disc set and the follow-up to the previous year's groundbreaking *Sgt Pepper's Lonely Hearts Club Band* – a tough act to follow, even for The Beatles. Famously diverse, according to Paul Hocker, author of *Expert Textpert – The Beatle Dictionary*, it is best viewed as “largely four solo albums bundled together under one blank cover”.

Like the “brutal diversity” of the double album's compositions – promoted at the time by the Beatles' Apple label as containing “30 new mind-bending songs” – the sleeve of *The White Album* was another important departure for the group. Like its predecessor, the Beatles knocked on the door of an established artist. British painter and collage artist Richard Hamilton created a plain white sleeve for the group – albeit one with a few important additions.

**The Beatles' *White Album* – but not as you know it**

On original UK pressings of *The White Album*, the band's name was embossed on the front of the double album, just below the middle of the album's right side. Additionally, a stamped serial number – unique to each copy – can be found in the bottom right-hand corner. This neat touch sees Hamilton transplanting a device from the highbrow art world – the numbered, limited edition – into the field of so-called lowbrow popular music – with the added irony that this ‘limited edition’ would run into the hundreds of thousands as it was an LP from the world's most popular group.

If you've ever handled an original, vintage pressing you'll take these details for granted. But what makes this particular copy so special is the unusual placement of the embossed lettering of ‘The Beatles’, the low, low number of the edition and the curious composition of the sleeve itself. And these quirks may well see some serious cash being splashed at Bonhams just before Christmas.

## I Need You

What Bonhams will be auctioning is a very early copy – Number 18, to be precise – in an early sleeve with a seemingly unique variant: it has been printed inside out.

The embossed ‘Beatles’ logo isn't where it should be, instead it appears on the *inside* of the gatefold sleeve over the photos of Paul and George. Additionally, whereas standard first pressings have ‘flipback’ flaps on the inside on the gatefold, Number 18's sleeve has them externally. Subsequently, the small black marker symbols – indicating where these flaps should be folded during assembly – are visible on the inside when normally they would be totally covered.

The unique printed number still appears on the outside of the sleeve as with a normal copy, albeit very faint. This is either due to having worn off over the last 45 years or even possibly due to not being printed correctly originally, as the flipback flap raises the outside sleeve somewhat. It can still





The embossed Beatles lettering is printed on the inside



clearly be read as No 0000018, making this one of the lowest numbers ever to come up for sale, with a mono copy of 0000005 – Number 5 – being the most notorious.

The mono Number 5, described as being in EX/EX+ condition, last changed hands in November 2008 when it was auctioned by the mysterious eBay seller agm67 for \$29,141 – around £19,200. This particular record has the distinction of *Record Collector* magazine's top slot in its 200 Rarest Records of All Time issue, being the lowest number to emerge of the very first run of *The White Album*. Who owned the first four copies? The group's not called the Fab Four for nothing and none of their copies have yet emerged.

"The much travelled and resold mono Number 5 was apparently plucked by its first owner from a pile in Ringo's flat around the time of the album's original release," explains *HFC* contributor JT Rathbone, collector of Fab Four vinyl. "John and Yoko were living there at the time and Lennon

allegedly told the original owner to help himself to a copy, but just 'Don't take number one – I want that.' If this anecdote is true, it may debunk the myth of multiples." Although it has been rumoured that more than one copy of the first 25 numbers – both mono and stereo – were printed, there is no reliable confirmation of this.

Number 18 is currently owned by Music and Video Exchange (MVE), the vinyl and CD arm of the Music and Goods Exchange chain. With seller confidentiality an important consideration in the world of collectable records, details are suitably scant. "It was sold into our deletions department a few years back," explains Rathbone, who is also MVE's resident Beatles expert. "I believe the seller claimed to have had a friend or relative at EMI who obtained it for them at the time of release. In my experience, most very low number copies that have surfaced have had a story connecting them with friends or associates of either the band, Apple records or EMI itself."

When sold to MVE, Number 18 was incomplete. Although it contains the two black, textured inner sleeves that accompanied early runs, the giant Richard Hamilton-designed fold-out poster and quartet of portrait inserts of Lennon, McCartney, Harrison and Starr dating from the time of release needed to be added.

### Revolution 9

Regardless of the condition of the records and the addition of a poster and inserts that, although contemporaneous to Number 18's 1968 release, are not the exact ones that it came with, the uniqueness of this particular copy of *The White Album* is not in question. "Myself and other Beatles collectors and specialists have found no evidence that any other copy has ever surfaced with this unique sleeve 'mistake'," says Rathbone.

"The availability of a mono version with a double digit serial number will be something that a fan with a decent bank balance will find hard to resist," adds Beatles expert Paul Hocker. "The attraction for me would be knowing that the embossed 18 on the cover gets me closer to the band and the chosen few who received the first pressings of the album. No other Beatles albums were numbered individually – and therefore cannot offer that intimate link to the band."

Hocker also points out a more esoteric draw for flush Beatles numerologists: "Lennon's well-known obsession with the number nine lends the appearance of this album an extra dimension. Its serial number – 0000018 – finds nine doubled and the combined numerals adding up to nine. And it was also their ninth studio album."

### ENTER THE MATRIX



The code unlocked! JT Rathbone reveals how to read Beatles LPs' matrix numbers

EMI and Decca both used a numbering and lettering system, which can be used to pinpoint a pressing fairly accurately. Using this system we can get an idea of how early the pressing was made. With Beatles albums being produced in such large numbers, a '-1' will always denote an album pressed in the year of release – in this case, 1968.

This album's unique matrix numbers – followed by a dash and an added digit – are located on both sides of each of the two LPs in the run-out groove.

The numbers also show how the earliest printed sleeves were not always paired with the earliest pressed copies. This is standard for Beatles and other releases of the period. It is also quite common for different sides to come from stampers produced at very different stages and the four sides here are a good example of that. They are as follows:

- Side 1 = XEX 709 - 1 (4 MM(44))
- Side 2 = XEX 710 - 1 (1 PM(64))
- Side 3 = XEX 711 - 1 (3 TA(93))
- Side 4 = XEX 712 - 1 (8 GMD(140))

The XEX prefix denotes mono, whereas YEX denotes stereo for all EMI Beatles releases.

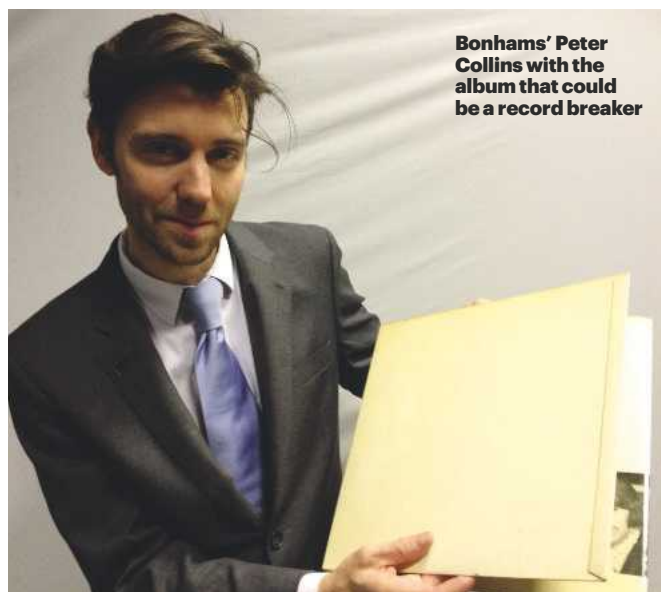
Side four, for example, indicates that it is from the 140th batch stamped from the eighth set of stampers manufactured from the original 'mother' disc. Normal batches were around 300, so it is possible that 42,000 copies had already been pressed from this particular stamper. We should bear in mind, however, that a Beatles LP could have advance orders in the hundreds of thousands and much stockpiling would be undertaken before release date – in this case November 22, 1968.

Therefore, these *could* be the original LPs that were housed in this unique sleeve, but as with many things in the complicated universe of Beatles record collecting, there's no definitive answer.



The number 18 that's causing all the fuss among Beatles collectors





**Bonhams' Peter Collins with the album that could be a record breaker**

With an auction date set in the run-up to Christmas, anticipation for Number 18 is high. "There has certainly been a buzz building around this record," enthuses Richard Scott, senior record buyer and online strategist at MVE. "Several people have asked about it even though we haven't publicised it yet... it's just been word of mouth in the Beatles community. We have asked around and no one has heard of this sleeve flaw before. It's a very exciting find."

"Bonhams' Entertainment auction will mean the record will be seen by customers all over the world who we wouldn't otherwise be able to reach," he continues.

"To the right buyer, this unique variation will be highly desirable – way beyond the music on the LP. The value of items like this is highly subjective. Many music fans would prefer a pristine reissue to a 45-year-old copy that has a misprinted sleeve. So, it is important that this record is available to the people who understand and appreciate the unusual appeal and value of it. This is where working with Bonhams makes sense."

## Maxwell's Silver Hammer

Number 18 is set to get collectors' pulses racing at Bonhams Entertainment Memorabilia sale on – appropriately – 18 December. Other lots under the hammer in this auction include the Grateful Dead's Jerry Garcia's Travis Bean electric guitar and a superb early promotional poster for The Jimi Hendrix Experience.

"Vinyl bidders aren't too different from other serious collectors," says Peter Collins, porter at Bonhams. "They enjoy filling a gap in their

**Beatles expert Hocker is just one of many fans excited by the rare record**



collection as much as any of us, although it can involve dizzying amounts of money – if they really want something, they just have to have it!"

Peter has a background in music retail stretching back to the mid-nineties, so he certainly recognises a one-off record when he sees one. With regards to Number 18, in his professional opinion: "The low number alone should equate to a fairly high value, with the hope that the unusual manufacturing mishap would not

actually put off potential bidders."

The journey from private collection to auction house is a straightforward one, and mega-rare LPs are treated no differently from any other items that come under the Bonhams' hammer for its moneyed clientele. "Clients bring in their items and arrange an appointment with a specialist from the relevant department," Peter explains. "It is decided whether if it is worth selling the item at auction and the seller then signs an agreement that the auction house will take a percentage – typically around 10 to 15 percent of the hammer price. Usually a reserve is agreed upon, which is a minimum amount of that the client will be happy to sell for."

## Money (That's What I Want)

Despite the wide availability of *The White Album* over a multitude of formats, the reserve price for this particular copy is no pocket change. "It can be bought on CD for about £10 or a reissue LP for around £20. Original pressings with low numbers frequently sell for hundreds of pounds. This LP with the flawed sleeve will be auctioned with a reserve price of £1,500," MVE's Richard reveals.

Compare this high figure with the other copies of *The White Album* that nestle in the racks of MVE's stores. At the time of writing, MVE's Soho branch has a UK sixties mono copy – number 0089080 – graded at VG condition "with a nice poster and prints, but tatty black inners" on sale for £195, whereas the flagship store in Notting Hill Gate has an EX condition, seventies UK stereo copy – with photos and poster – available for £58. Both records serve to illustrate the high prices that even relatively standard issue copies of this ever-popular album can command 45 years after its release.

With items from Jimi Hendrix and the Grateful Dead in the same auction, it's

## STEEL FOR A MONKEY

Ultra-rare promo record from Beatles' drummer scoops £500 at auction



Solo vinyl outings from The Beatles can also command high prices, but one of the oddest – and rarest – was recently sold for a sizable £500 by eBay seller tabletforme (a reputable specialist in sixties and seventies vinyl), popsike.com (online listings auction results of rare vinyl) reveals.

The record in question is *Steel*, a super-scarce seven-inch promotional single from R.O.R. – Ringo Or Robin, the company the Beatles' drummer co-founded with designer Robin Cruickshank in 1969. As well as designing stainless steel furniture and household goods – including a beautiful Rolls-Royce coffee table – the duo were also behind Apple's official merchandise (mirrors, paperweights and so on – themselves now extremely rare).

This one-sided interview disc, consisting of Ringo explaining the company's goals over some Moog synthesiser doodles, was a promotional item for the



1972 R.O.R. reception in conjunction with the British Steel Corporation (hence the title) at Liberty's department store, London, and available for just one week. Basically, if you're a Ringo Starr

completist, this ridiculously niche, limited edition record represents the Holy Grail.

Although this copy of *Steel* changed hands for a not insubstantial £500 in July, this figure is a quarter of the price that the *Record Collector Rare Record Price Guide*, suggests a mint copy would fetch – and arguably a more accurate reflection of the record's actual worth.

apparent that the sixties remain permanently in vogue for global collectors to whom money is little object. "Certain classic sixties albums are fetching the kind of money that makes auctioning the best way of reaching all the collectors from around the world," Peter explains. "Many bid from abroad via the internet or phone to secure their desired lots. Demo discs and acetates of classic rock artists from the fifties to the seventies sell very well – as well as signed records, guitars and photos from artists right up to the likes of Oasis and Paul Weller."

Number 18 should "generate some real excitement", Peter believes. "There is a niche of collectors of unusual, one-off oddities. *The White Album* even has its own sub-niche of fanatical collectors – with the added bonus here of the ultra-low number. It only needs two collectors with deep pockets and it could really fly away..."

How high this mega-rarity does fly remains to be seen, but we'll be sure to update you on just how well it fared in a future issue ●



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# Musicreviews

HOT PICK



## Aladdin Sane David Bowie

★★★★★

CD 40th Anniversary Edition EMI

**THE MEDIA FRENZY** occasioned by Bowie's first album in 10 years was nothing compared with the fevered excitement that greeted the release of *Aladdin Sane* back in 1973.

*The Rise and Fall Of Ziggy Stardust and the Spiders From Mars* had turned Bowie into the most talked-about artist of his generation. Pre-orders for the follow-up topped 100,000 for the first time since the heyday of The Beatles, and gave Bowie his first number one album (it's one of rock history's quirkier facts that *Ziggy*, arguably one of the most influential rock albums of the seventies, was kept from the number one spot by the cheap and cheerful Woolworth's multi-artist compilation *20 Dynamic Hits*).

Written and recorded in snatched moments during a US tour, Bowie himself described *Aladdin Sane* as "Ziggy goes to America" and the influence of Lou Reed and Iggy Pop is evident in the album's edgier rock tracks such as *Watch That Man* and *Panic In Detroit*. The craziness surrounding Bowie's hectic apotheosis into glam-rock messiah could

have hobbled his inspiration. But instead, he drew from it a turbo-charged creative urgency that infuses every one of the original 10 tracks. The decision to reissue the album without the addition of 'bonus' material will please those who think it sacrilege to add or subtract a single note to or from such a seminal recording. Others may feel

**Aladdin Sane was kept from the number one spot by a Woolworth's multi-artist compilation**

short-changed that there's no bonus live performances from the time and non-album studio tracks, like the brilliant *All The Young Dudes*.

The original vinyl pressing was criticised at the time of release for the sludgy sound that bedevilled several tracks. On the Stones-influenced opener *Watch That Man*, Bowie's vocal was oddly muffled,

while his harmonica on *Cracked Actor* was buried so deep that it's sharp tones were almost totally lost.

According to some sources, this was down to the mixing process being compromised in the record company's haste to get the album out. But another account claims that the sound was quite deliberate and Bowie was seeking a raw, garage-rock primitiveness to contrast with the plangent cabaret decadence of the album's ballads such as *Time* and *Lady Grinning Soul*.

Despite comprehensive digital remastering by Ray Staff, who cut the original LP at Trident Studios 40 years ago, neither of the controversial tracks sounds much different – so perhaps the murkiness was indeed an intentional part of Bowie's plan.

Elsewhere, Staff's re-treatment of the master tapes boosts the jazzy, avant-garde arpeggios of Mike Garson's piano playing, particularly on the title track and *Time*, while the cranked-up rockers *Panic In Detroit*, the breakneck version of *Let's Spend The Night Together* and *The Jean Genie*, sound much fatter and less brittle. **NW**

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## The Beach Boys

Made In California

★★★★★

Six CD box set

Capitol

**THE 50TH ANNIVERSARY** tour and accompanying new studio album *That's Why God Made The Radio* found the surviving Beach Boys understandably starting to creak with age – and sounding a little sad as a result.

This then, is a much better way to celebrate their half century, an ageless collection of 174 sun-kissed tracks from *Surfin' Safari* to *Good Vibrations* and an entire disc full of 'from the vaults' rarities that until now have never before seen the light of day.

The presentation in a beautiful high school annual-style hardbound book

## 174 sun-kissed tracks from *Surfin' Safari* to *Good Vibrations* and a disc full of rarities

with replicated classic artwork and memorabilia is impressive enough, but it's the music that really grabs the attention. Presented chronologically and digitally remastered by the same team that won a Grammy award for its fine restoration work of the group's legendary *Smile* sessions, the set gloriously tracks the progression from the high-tide of sixties carefree teenage innocence through to the symphonic complexity of the Beach Boys' later recordings. **NW**



## Alice Sara Ott Mussorgsky Pictures at an Exhibition

★★★★★

CD

Deutsche Grammophon

**RECORDED LIVE AT** the White Nights Festival in St Petersburg, Ott gives a commanding and atmospheric performance of Mussorgsky's *Pictures*. Lasting over 35 minutes, tempi are quite slow in places, and the music unfolds at a pace that is often mesmerising and hypnotic. There are lots of subtle imaginative touches that catch the ear, but this is not an effete rendition; the big moments are executed with unflinching power and rich sonority. The live recordings sound smooth and natural, with a deceptively wide dynamic range. **JH**



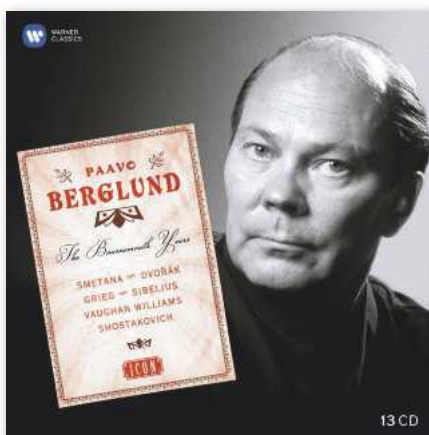
## Bruce Springsteen Tracks

★★★★★

Four CD boxset

Columbia

**MOST RETROSPECTIVE COLLECTIONS** of studio out-takes illustrate precisely why the material was not released at the time – it simply wasn't good enough. Springsteen is the exception, a songwriter so prolifically consistent he could afford to give away to other artists such high-calibre compositions as *Because The Night*, *Fire* and *Hearts Of Stone* rather than release them himself. Almost every one of these 66 'ones that got away', recorded between 1972-95, but not included on his albums at the time, is a gem. It's that combination of quality in quantity that earned him the name The Boss. **NW**



## Paavo Berglund

Icon  
Bournemouth Symphony Orchestra

★★★★★

13 CDs

Warner Classics

**Take your pick from a selection of stunning hi-fi demo tunes**

**DURING THE SEVENTIES** and early eighties, Paavo Berglund recorded many LPs for EMI. Most were with the Bournemouth Symphony Orchestra, and many were subsequently issued on CD. This set brings together most of Berglund's output for EMI in good transfers. My only (slight) complaint is that Shostakovich's *6th Symphony* is now split between two discs, but this is perhaps the only gripe one can raise. The recordings are mostly analogue, but a few are digital. Many were rightly considered hi-fi demonstration discs at the time, and they remain among EMI's best of the period – bright, immediate, and detailed. At under £30, this set is hard to resist! **JH**



## Schubert Piano sonatas No 16 D845 and No 21 D960 Maria João Pires, Piano

★★★★★

CD

DG

**IN THE FIRST** movement of *D845*, Pires conjures up the aural impression of a vast landscape. Her playing does not encompass the dynamic swings of (say) Alfred Brendel, but is gentler and more reflective – more inward looking. Yet, good as it is, it's the performance of *D960* that makes this disc worth buying. It's a very considered and mature interpretation that is both deeply pondered yet completely natural and artless at the same time. DG's piano sound is open, clear, and immediate. It's dynamic, yet not too percussive or forceful. Clarity is good, and the tone of the instrument sounds truthful and real. **JH**

## BLU-RAY/DVD ★★★★★

### Patti Smith Live at Montreux

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**MONTREUX SEEMS LIKE** an unlikely place to find the high priestess of punk, but it's a mark of her capabilities that she pulls it off in style. Smith and her

band are consummate musicians aided by Television front man Tom Verlaine on guitar. Together they have a great sound with solid bass and an open, uncompressed feel that enhances the performance. Smith can still whip up a frenzy, yet has a wide emotional palette to draw on, which makes her a very human and engaging performer. **JK**



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## The Jam

The Gift

★★★★★

4 CDs

UMC/Polydor

**THE JAM'S FAREWELL** 1982 album is probably one of the least loved in Paul Weller's catalogue – but listening to *The Gift* again 30 years on, it becomes clear that any ranking at the time must have been coloured by the animosity generated over the band's break up. Led by the chart-topping single *Town Called Malice*, the 11 tracks on the original release constitute an immaculate set of songs, evidenced by the fact that Weller still plays half of them on stage to this day.

For once, the expanded four-disc approach genuinely adds value and

**The 10 additional B sides would have made a fine album in their own right**

much of the additional material signposts the more soulful direction Weller would take with the Style Council. The 10 additional singles and B-sides would have made a fine album in their own right, while the live disc from the Jam's final tour is a riot, the DVD makes for excellent viewing and the disc of demos offer real insight into Weller's *modus operandi*. **NW**



CD

**Rachmaninov**  
Complete works for  
Piano and Orchestra.  
Valentina Lisitsa LSO  
Michael Francis

★★★★★

Decca 478 4890

**THESE ARE POWERHOUSE** performances of the four concertos and Paganini Rhapsody; vivid – exciting – passionate. Lisitsa has a commanding technique, and she is equal to Rachmaninov's demands, technically. While her playing could not be described as lush, there's poetry too, and plenty of imagination, despite the fast speeds and forceful execution. The Decca recording is excellent; clear, forward, and very vivid, allowing lots of subtle detail to be heard. The heavy brass sounds very immediate, but the piano is always well-balanced and clear. An impressive achievement! **JH**



5 CD box set

**The Stranglers**  
The Old Testament  
- The UA Studio  
Recordings 1977-82

★★★★★

EMI

**ALTHOUGH THEY WORE** the T-shirts and adopted the attitude, the songwriting prowess and musical proficiency of The Stranglers meant that they never really fit in with the primitive three-chord-thrashing of punk rock. Almost 100 tracks arranged chronologically chart their prolific first six years, from the studied menace of *Peaches* and *No More Heroes* to the, radio-friendly pop of *Duchess* and *Golden Brown*. What emerges is a band characterised by high-class musicianship whose early desire to shock swiftly gave way to the time-honoured values of great songcraft. **NW**



The disc ends  
with Bernstein's  
*Candide* overture

## Rachmaninov

Symphony No 2 Philharmonia  
Orchestra Yevgeny Svetlanov

★★★★★

CD

ICA

**THIS IS A** live performance from London's Royal Festival Hall, recorded back in 1993 by the BBC, and it catches Svetlanov at his most inspired and persuasive. The featured performance is very cohesive, as though cut from a single piece of cloth. Svetlanov's tempi are quite slow (the performance lasts just over 63 minutes), but he keeps things moving while bringing out lots of hidden detail...

The recording is a touch bright and forward, but not too dry considering it's the RFH. The brass are well caught, though sometimes, the strings seem a tad backward. But, clarity is good and overall the balance is fine. **JH**



CD

**Rachmaninov**  
The Bells;  
Symphonic Dances  
Berlin Philharmonic  
Sir Simon Rattle

★★★★★

Warner Classics

**SIR SIMON MADE** a memorable recording of the *Symphonic Dances* back in the early eighties with the City of Birmingham Orchestra. This new version is a rich, refined affair, offering smooth polished playing, allied to wide dynamic contrasts. It's an expertly paced account that manages to sound relaxed yet rhythmically adroit at the same time. *The Bells* is played and sung with great sensitivity and scrupulous attention to detail, while the recording encompasses Rachmaninov's huge climaxes with ease. The recordings sound smooth yet detailed, with excellent clarity and a wide dynamic range. **JH**

## BLU-RAY/DVD ★★★★★

**Paul McCartney and Wings**  
Rockshow

DVD



**FILMED IN 1976** on the US leg of the *Wings at the Speed of Light* tour, this finds Macca having a great time rocking it up in a number of huge venues. Originally released on Betamax in 1981, this is the first digital version and includes a selection of Beatles numbers, which hadn't seen a live airing since 1966. The sound is refreshingly analogue sounding by modern standards, the bass has been amped up and the treble is soft but it's very listenable. Presented in a hardback booklet, *Rockshow* is a must for Macca fans. **JK**

# *icon Audio*

## The Unique Stereo 40 MK III KT88m

*Our best ever mid range amplifier!*



*designed by David Shaw*

Shown with upgraded Treasure CV181s and Full Music TJ 6SL7, Jensen copper foil in paper and oil capacitors

*Low Distortion Tertiary  
wound transformers*

### *Superbly engineered. Very versatile 40w+40w UL or 20w+20w Triode*

Whilst our flagship models rightly get superb praise from reviewers worldwide for their performance and value, we never lose focus on our more affordable products and regularly update them when the opportunity arises. Such is the case with our Stereo 40. Our original brief over 10 years ago to make the best possible EL34/KT88 valve amplifier for a reasonable price still holds true. Our latest Stereo 40 MK IIIm incorporates several improvements. Now with a meter which allows a very simple way to check that the output valves are operating at their optimum value and best performance. This will also tell you when a valve is due for replacement or when it is failing. Something other designs don't do. The Stereo 40 is almost unique in its ability to use a very wide range of valves including 6L6, 5881, EL34, 6CA7, KT66, KT77, 6550, KT88. Now made very easy to change if you like "tube rolling".

In our quest to make the best amplifier in its class we also include all the features we think a good amplifier should have including Triode or Ultralinear operation, remote control, a record loop, a warm up/standby facility, valve rectifier, Low Distortion Tertiary output transformers and many more features.

There are also things we don't include like printed circuit boards and transistors both of which we feel degrade the performance of valve amplifiers.

Obviously the overriding priority is the sound quality which must come from good engineering which we believe to be far ahead of the Stereo 40's modest price.

We guarantee you will not be disappointed!

Our four cornerstones are **Quality Performance** and **Value**. And in the future, **Service** when you need it. In this age of "built in obsolescence" it may be unfashionable to talk about repairs and spares but our commitment to future service means you should be able to enjoy your amplifier for at least 20 years.

All of our amplifiers are designed and finished in Leicester they are commissioned and serviced by the people that designed them so you can be sure of our quality control and long term performance. Our new series of "Low Distortion Tertiary" output transformers are the best we have ever made, enabling us to less global feedback by about 40%.

All our amplifiers are hand made using "point to point" soldering without using printed circuit boards. We are convinced this sounds better. It also allows for easy servicing, upgrades and modifications and long life. Remote controlled volume is useful for fine tuning your listening level to match your taste. High quality components are used throughout including an "ALPS" volume control, silver plated PTFE audio cable SCR capacitors audiophile resistors. Power Amplifier operation is possible by selecting a lower "gain" on the rear of the amplifier (this is done without attenuation which would lose quality). Loudspeakers of nominal impedance between 3 ohms and 10 ohms may be used with virtually no reduction in power or quality. A valve rectifier with choke regulated power supply adds a richness to the sound quality that silicon devices alone are unable to do. Tape and other methods of recording and playback are catered for by the "Tape Monitor". Also useful for Home Cinema applications.

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## Burt Bacharach

The Art Of The Songwriter – Anyone Who Had A Heart

★★★★★

Six CDs

Universal

**HE RANKS WITH** George Gershwin and Irving Berlin in the pantheon of popular music composers – but it takes a box set containing 140 of his compositions to realise just how staggeringly high the quality control has been over six decades. One disc in this collection consists of Bacharach's own recordings, but his genius lay in his pen not his voice, and so the real glory lies in the five discs of classic recordings of his songs by everyone from Ella Fitzgerald to Rufus Wainwright.

Intelligent remastering lends a certain cohesion to the sound of so many

**His songs became standards because they lent themselves to jazz, soul and pop**

different artists, styles and eras – and few were ever stupid enough to ruin the cool, breezy sophistication of a Bacharach number with cheap production; indeed, where ever possible you got the main man himself to take the helm. But it's the sheer diversity on show here that really appeals. His songs became standards because they lent themselves equally to jazz, soul and pop treatments. **NW**



**Fela Kuti**  
The Best of the Black President 2

★★★★★

2 CDs

Knitting Factory

**THE LATE, GREAT** Nigerian Afrobeat king recorded almost 50 albums between 1969 and his death in 1997, with tracks often filling an entire side of vinyl. Such a sprawling catalogue makes it hard to distil Kuti's genius into a conventional anthology.

But this set of a dozen tracks – none of them under ten minutes – does a noble job in presenting Fela's music in an accessible fashion without losing the spirit of his let-it-all-hang-out approach.

Sympathetic digital remastering has given his work a sharper edge without ever sounding brash or brittle, and his global stature today is probably greater than at any point during his lifetime. **NW**



**Joni Mitchell**  
The Studio Albums 1968-1979

★★★★★

10 CD box set

Warners/Rhino

**THIS COLLECTION GATHERS** Joni's first 10 studio albums recorded over a 12-year period, presented as we first heard them in neat wallets with the original artwork in an ergonomically-friendly slim-line box.

Consistency of quality may characterise Mitchell's work, but at the same time she never stood still and the artistic growth and musical development across the 105 tracks is breathtaking. From early efforts such as *Song To A Seagull* (1968) through to *Mingus* (1979) – an inventive collaboration with jazz bassist Charles Mingus – Mitchell's artistry remains bold and undimmed. **NW**



**Classical perfection straight out of the seventies**

## Debussy; Ravel; Scriabin

Symphony Orchestra  
Claudio Abbado

★★★★★

CD

DG 'Originals' 00289 479 0013

**THE DEBUSSY AND** Ravel pieces were taped during DG's first Boston sessions in 1970, and they present this great orchestra in a new light. The sound – spacious and refined, yet detailed and atmospheric – is beautiful and realistic. In Debussy's *Nocturnes*, this delicate hall ambience creates some magical effects. Abbado's performances were (and are) a model of taste, with every strand carefully balanced and subtly nuanced. Scriabin's *Poem of Ecstasy*, recorded a year later, sounds suitably feverish and volatile – the sound being a mite harder, tonally, and more forward. DG's new 'Originals' transfer improves slightly on the earlier full-price issue. **JH**



## Stravinsky Conducts

Rite of Spring; Firebird Suite (1945) Columbia Symphony/New York Philharmonic

★★★★★

Two CDs

Sony 88765442692

**2013 MARKS THE** the 100th anniversary of the *Rite of Spring*'s premiere. To mark the occasion, Sony has reissued Stravinsky's famous 1960 stereo recording of the work, coupled with his much less well-known 1940 mono version with the New York Philharmonic. The stereo account still stands up very well with the sound seeming a tad cleaner/fresher than the transfer in the big Sony Stravinsky Edition box. The New York performances are impressively gutsy and amazingly well recorded for 1940. Rare session photos and a reprint of Stravinsky's celebrated article *Apropos Le Sacre* add up to an unmissable reissue for collectors. **JH**

## BLU-RAY/DVD ★★★★★

### Various

Produced By George Martin

Eagle-rock.com



### THIS DOCUMENTARY IS

excellent viewing for anyone interested in the development of pop music production. Martin started at Parlophone in 1950 producing comedy records with Peter Sellers

and the Goons, but in 1962 Brian Epstein played him a tape of The Beatles. He thought their music was "rubbish", but agreed to an audition and was won over by their charisma. The rest, as they say, is history and this reveals just how formative an influence Martin was on the fab four and popular music in general. **JK**



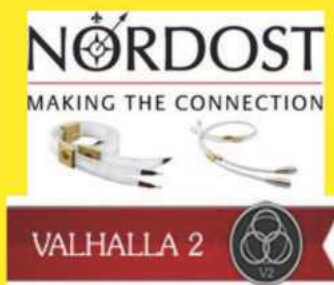
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Nordost introduced its new Valhalla 2 Reference Cable Range at the High End Show, M.O.C. in Munich, Germany on May 9, 2013. The latest range consists of analogue, digital, and tone arm interconnects, as well as loudspeaker and power cables. The new Valhalla 2 range uses upgraded Dual Mono-Filament technology, along with an innovative proprietary connector called the HOLO:PLUG™. The HOLO:PLUG™ is a patent pending connector, designed to be the best possible interface between the cable and the component. Perfect signal integrity can be measured throughout the system. Designed to transfer every last nuance of detail, and they claim the HOLO:PLUG™ is a miracle of mechanical and electrical integrity. If you have an original Valhalla cable and wish to upgrade to the new Valhalla 2 please give us a call as we have an affordable upgrade path.

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~ Harry Pearson ~

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### PANDA FEET - Cable and Equipment support



Made from sustainable Carbonised Bamboo, designed by Dave, and made exclusively in the UK by Atacama for High End Cable, the Panda Feet will guide and support most makes of High End Hi-fi cables from ribbons, ovals and round. As well as being ECO friendly and sustainable, Bamboo is fast being acknowledged as one of the finest materials for use in Hi-fi supports as many makers are employing the medium. This is the first time this sustainable product has been specifically designed to support your High End Cables. Panda Feet provide sound footing and spacing off the floor. Lifting your cables off the floor helps to isolate the effects of vibration and the Bamboo Panda Feet can also be used under power blocks and power conditioners when there is no room on your Hi-fi rack and where the only space available is the floor. A tidy solution.



HOT PICK



## Bob Dylan The Official Bootleg Series Vol 10: Another Self Portrait (1969-71)

★★★★★

Two CD set/four CD set/vinyl **Sony**

**DYLAN'S 1970 ALBUM** *Self Portrait* has long been the most despised album in his catalogue, a ragbag of country and pop standards sung in a off-key croon and overdubbed with syrupy strings and backing vocals.

On its release, *Rolling Stone's* infamous review of the offending work opened with the words "What is this s\*\*\*?" Many believe that Dylan was playing a bleak joke on his more obsessive fans in a bid to undermine his own exalted reputation and shed the 'voice of a generation' tag. So it's a brave act for the latest release in Dylan's ongoing 'Official Bootleg' series to sail into such troubled waters.

In more recent years, *Self Portrait* has been rehabilitated by some as Dylan's bold exploration of the roots of 'Americana', a flawed, but laudable journey down the great river of popular American song from trad folk ballads to covers of Elvis and the Everly Brothers. It's a view dramatically reinforced here as the album is reconfigured with an altered track listing, the removal of the banal overdubs and the addition of previously unreleased

tracks that are far superior to many of those that made the cut first time around. Add tracks recorded for the swift follow-up, 1971's *New Morning* – seen at the time as a kind of 'apology' for *Self Portrait* – and what emerges is a fascinating picture of a profound artist in a period of transition, trying to shed the baggage of the past and recast himself as a song and dance man.

**This portrait of Dylan is so different that it feels as if you're seeing the subject for the first time**

The seven tracks from the original 1970 release are retained and stripped of the overdubs that caused so much consternation at the time, and the transformation is astonishing. Songs such as *Days Of 49*, *Copper Kettle* and *Belle Isle*, which once sounded trite and cluttered now sound vividly

sharp, raw and haunting. A further nine unreleased tracks from the original *Self Portrait* sessions, including *Railroad Bill*, *House Carpenter*, *Tattle O'Day* and a magnificently sung *Pretty Saro* are fantastic performances in which Dylan sounds like he's not so much singing as inhabiting the songs. Their omission from the original release further fuels the theory of deliberate perversity on Dylan's part by putting out a record he knew many of his fans would hate and get them 'off his back'.

The tracks from the *New Morning* sessions contain further stunning revelations with the original over-wrought jauntiness of songs such as *If Not For You* and *Went To See The Gypsy* replaced with previously unreleased versions of beguiling simplicity.

Seldom can familiar music have been more successfully presented in an entirely new and gratifying way. The face may be the same; but the colours, contours, textures and perspective of this portrait are so different that it feels as if you're seeing the subject for the first time. **NW**





## Your listening room and a jet engine – what problem do they share?

**“Wow” and “That’s amazing” LISTENERS’ REACTIONS AT RECENT SHOWS TO THE PANEL DEMONSTRATIONS**

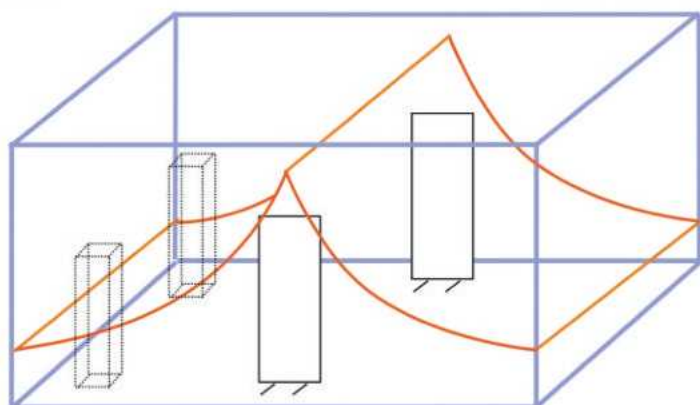
**Both cause a lot of unwanted noise – but they’re treatable with thousands of carefully calculated holes.**

In the Airbus jet engine the front compressor noise is cut down with a special micro-perforated lining for the air intake.

In your listening room “old” **sound waves** that slop from end to end, and side to side – like water in a fish tank that’s moved – can be *quietened* in a similar way.

All the time you are listening the speakers project “new” sound into a space still filled with music from a few milliseconds before. New and old **intermodulate** and *your room destroys an amazing amount of fine detail.*

You are propagating “new” music signals into “old” air. Think of the interference between fresh waves that break on a beach and meet the previous retreating wave.



Air movement reaches peak **velocity** in the middle of the room (only end-to-end shown here) where the panels are most effective

**The solution** – When you energise the room with a music signal thousands of carefully-calculated micro-perforations in the **LeadingEdge** panels create turbulence as the air, slopping to and fro between walls, passes over their surfaces. We hear air *pressure* changes as excess bass at the room boundaries, where the air is at zero *particle velocity* and maximum pressure change. It reaches maximum velocity (and zero pressure change!) in the centre of the room where the perforations create **aerodynamic drag** and the panels absorb this velocity energy into an internal honeycomb.

**This principle of creating aerodynamic drag**, that removes unwanted energy *across the spectrum*, is far more effective than using conventional foam-filled panels that work only at narrow frequency bands.

Significantly, *drag increases with the square of the velocity – when the velocity doubles, the drag increases four times!*

In this way, the LeadingEdge panels are “reactive” – the more unwanted energy bouncing round the room, the more effective they become.

Visitors to our rooms at shows this year were truly astonished as we played music and first covered then uncovered the panels.

There were spontaneous reactions like “Wow” and “That’s amazing!”

Panels are available in different sizes and three standard finishes: Cherry, White, and Light Oak though almost any finish can be ordered to match décor.

But you say, “I couldn’t possibly fit those into my living room.” Perhaps not free-standing ones but had you considered they can be wall-mounted and become part of the room design, even a feature with a beautiful, rich veneer finish?

An ideal solution is to place panels on the ceiling, where they absorb energy from all directions. In this room with 60% glass windows and hardwood floors the panels are a feature, with recessed lighting. The result is a quiet, comfortable room despite all those hard surfaces.



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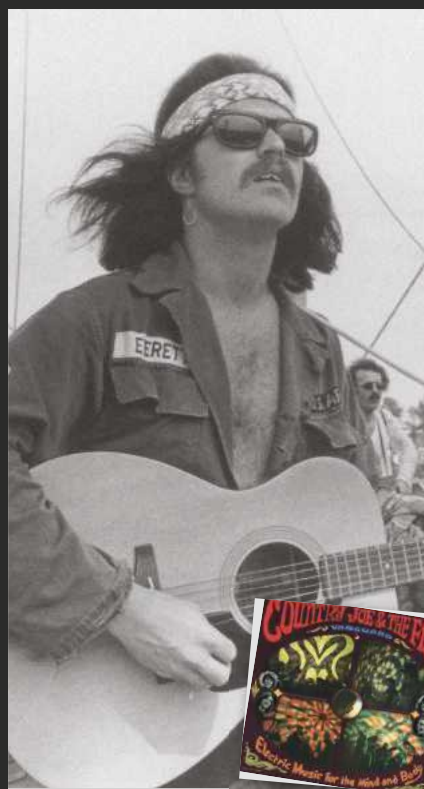
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## Country Joe and The Fish

Electric Music For The Mind and Body

★★★★★

Two CDs

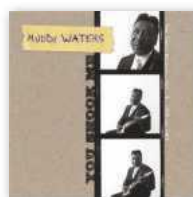
Ace

**RELEASED JUST AS** 1967's 'summer of love' was about to dawn, this debut was a game changer that defined the sound of acid rock as thrillingly as anything else emerging from San Francisco at the time. McDonald's absurdly drug-laced lyrics, Barry Melton's glissando guitar and the spacey keyboards of David Cohen set out to expand our minds by creating an aural acid trip.

Improvised free jazz, baroque classical influences, bucolic folk, weird time signatures and blues-rock coalesce to create a swirling psych kaleidoscope of intricacy assembled in movements like

**Defined the sound of acid rock as thrillingly as anything else from San Francisco**

an acid symphony. Reissued as a two-disc set in both the original stereo and mono mixes, the latter is a somewhat pointless exercise as experiencing psychedelia in mono is like listening in black and white. **NW**



2 CDs

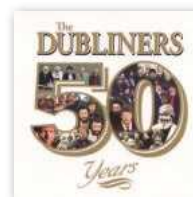
**Muddy Waters**  
You Shook Me -  
The Chess Masters  
1958-63

★★★★★

Universal

**BY 1958, WATERS** had already defined the sound of electric blues. In his mid-40s, he was in his pomp and ready to adapt to the changing market, which required him to cut full-length albums rather than singles. It was also the moment when the Rolling Stones were about to take up Waters' legacy.

The core of this collection is his first two great custom-made LPs: *Muddy Waters Sings Bill Broonzy* and *Muddy Waters At Newport*. What impresses most is the visceral power of what were mostly single-tracked analogue recordings, their heft impressively boosted by some superbly sympathetic remastering. **NW**



3 CDs

**The Dubliners**  
50 Years

★★★★★

One Little Indian

**THE NAME REMAINS** the same but the line-up of Ireland's most famous folk flame-keepers has changed quite a few times over the years. Marking their half-century, this three-CD set cherry picks the best from their beginnings in 1962 through definitive versions of folk classics from *The Black Velvet Band* to *Carrickfergus* and much more.

The late Ronnie Drew may have been the most distinctive, but there's a good selection from Luke Kelly and Paddy Reilly, as well as some gorgeous instrumental passages. It's a rollicking run through history and lifestyle with a skip in the step, a shout on the lips and a tear in the eye. **DO**



**A gripping intensity, which at times could be more measured**

## Wagner

Magic Fire  
Risto-Matti Marin, Piano

★★★★★

Hybrid SACD

Alba ABCD 353

**WAGNER WROTE LITTLE** for piano; none of it important. These pieces are transcriptions of music from his operas, including Liszt's arrangement of the *Tannhauser* overture, and the spinning song from *Flying Dutchman*. Among other highlights, Tausig's hair-raising arrangement of the *Ride of the Valkyries* stands out. Perhaps best of all is Louis Brassin's *Magic Fire* music from *The Ring*. This receives a very atmospheric performance of real power; one hardly misses the orchestra such is the effect produced. The recording sets the piano in a clear, but reverberant acoustic and the instrument has plenty of air and space around it without the sound becoming diffuse. **JH**



2 CD deluxe edition

**Marianne Faithfull**  
Broken English

★★★★★

Universal

**1979'S BROKEN ENGLISH** was Faithfull's finest album and a record that still stands as one of the most potent, spirited, coruscatingly honest and victorious artistic statements in the history of female pop. Turning the destruction of her vocal chords to advantage, her 'new' voice had a lived-in, whiskey-soaked and nicotine-stained patina that lent the songs extraordinary depths of character and meaning.

If ever an album captured the sound of an artist breaking free from the shackles of convention and raising two fingers to the ties that bind, that record is *Broken English*. **NW**

## BLU-RAY/DVD ★★★★★

**Various Artists**  
Experience Montreux

Eagle Vision



**THIS TWO DISC** 2D/3D is a showcase for the Swiss festival as it approaches its 50th anniversary. Disc one gathers performances from artists including Massive Attack, Elvis Costello, Mumford & Sons

and even a jazz musician, Leznek Mozner. The drive, however, is that, though Montreux is ostensibly a jazz festival, it goes out of its way to attract musicians of all types. The second disc contains performances by Herbie Hancock and producer Quincy Jones, both aided by some very fine musicians indeed. **JK**

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## Laura Mvula

Sing To The Moon

★★★★★

CD

rcarecords.com

**UNTIL VERY RECENTLY** Laura Mvula was a music graduate working as a receptionist for the Birmingham Symphony Orchestra. That was before she started creating her own uniquely textured songs, which sound like Nina Simone singing the Beach Boys as produced by Björk in a gospel church.

She uses her own multi-layered vocal harmonies to construct elaborate soundscapes like in *She*, which is a hymn to quiet persistence that floats by on a bed of gently tinkling celeste-style keyboard and emphatic choral accompaniment, and stand out hit

**She sounds like Nina Simone singing the Beach Boys as produced by Björk**

*Green Garden*, which grooves along with infectious handclaps and escalating vocal surges.

Supported by strings, piano and percussion with hints of brass and synths, her songs are just quirky enough to be compelling and boast enough melodic hooks and harmonic intelligence to be entrancing. Her voice has a rich, warm timbre eschewing pyrotechnics in favour of directness. It's a beautiful debut, and her sudden rise to fame is entirely warranted. **DO**



**Sibelius**  
The Seven  
Symphonies;  
Tapiola, Finlandia,  
etc

★★★★★

4 CDs

Paavo Berglund

**PAAVO BERGLUND RECORDED** the seven Sibelius symphonies three times and his Bournemouth set was the first, and best. The LPs came out between 1972 and 1975, and were eagerly purchased by Sibelius lovers! Curiously, EMI never issued these recordings on CD.

For this reissue, the original tapes have been remastered, and the sound is crisper and more dynamic than the old transfers. The performances have plenty of swagger and the players excel themselves, playing with great passion. The recordings were Demonstration Standard in their day, and still stand up well. **JH**



**Schumann and Brahms**  
Symphonic Studies  
and Paganini  
Variations Alexander  
Romanovsky

★★★★★

CD

Decca

**PIANIST ALEXANDER ROMANOVSKY** gives a sensitively imaginative account of Schumann's *Symphonic Studies*. He includes the five posthumous etudes that Schumann deleted when the work was first published. Brahms' *Paganini* variations are made of sterner stuff, and call for excellent technique. He's fully equal to the demands of the music, but finds much hidden poetry that others miss.

The recording sounds crisp and clear, with the piano placed fairly close in a warm, but not too lively acoustic. Clarity is excellent, and the 'decay' of long held notes is well conveyed. **JH**



**Fresh, lively  
and idiomatic  
performances**

## Turina

Danzas Fantásticas Clara Mouriz – mezzo-soprano, BBC Philharmonic, Juanjo Mena

★★★★★

CD

Chandos CHAN-10753

**THIS STUNNING CD** contains some of Turina's best-known works, and the performances under Juanjo Mena sound fresh, lively, and idiomatic, with plenty of sultry atmosphere and Spanish temperament thrown in for good measure. Turina was a prolific composer, who in his sixty-seven years wrote more than one hundred works. The Chandos/BBC recording offers lots of bright-edged brilliance and immediacy, yet sounds refined and clean, with a wide dynamic range and crisp attack. There's a nice balance between clarity/immediacy and ambience – the orchestra being set slightly back in a spacious, but clear acoustic. **JH**



**Mahler**  
Symphony No 9

★★★★★

2 CDs

Gustavo Dudamel

**ON THE EVIDENCE** of this live recording, the LAPO is in great shape; disciplined and well-tuned, with a rich burnished tone that sounds very European. Dudamel's pacing of this demanding work is unerring, and his performance sounds cohesive. Tempi are broad without dragging and Mahler's dynamics are scrupulously observed. Clarity is excellent, the sound is exceptionally clean and natural and the orchestra is precisely balanced.

Tonally, the sound is sonorous and warm, with wide dynamic range and plenty of contrast. If you think of the LAPO as a slick and superficial combination lacking depth, think again. **JH**

**BLU-RAY/DVD** ★★★★★

**The Rolling Stones**  
Crossfire Hurricane

Eagle-rock.com



**THIS TWO HOUR** plus disc is based on recent unfilmed interviews with the band. It brings together familiar footage with some rare material that is not always the best quality, but does shed new light on an

illustrious career. You don't often see Ronnie Wood era Stones from the seventies, nor some of the outlandish garb Mick wore in the eighties. The sound is hugely variable, but that's not the point; this is a comprehensive study of a musical phenomenon that appears to be almost invincible. **JK**

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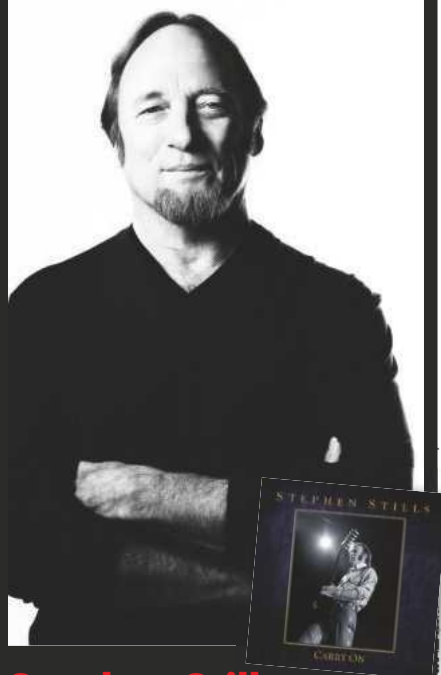
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## Stephen Stills

Carry On

★★★★★

Four CD box set

Rhino

**FOR A DECADE** and more at the start of his career, Stephen Stills was blessed with a rare musical genius, the evidence of which is present in abundance on this overdue career retrospective.

In Buffalo Springfield he led the only band to challenge the Byrds as America's answer to The Beatles. In Crosby, Stills, Nash and Young he was part of the biggest-selling US band of the early seventies and his colleagues dubbed him 'Captain Many Hands' for his tendency to insist on playing every instrument. He wrote some of the greatest songs of the age, had the voice

**In Crosby, Stills, Nash & Young he was part of the biggest-selling US band of the seventies**

of a fallen angel and played guitar like a demon. And all before he turned 30; it seemed there was nothing Stephen Stills couldn't do.

The chronological arrangement of these four discs emphasises the rich fruit of the early years and the barrenness that followed.

Unsurprisingly, most of the previously unreleased material – including *No-Name Jam*, a thrilling guitar duel with Hendrix – also dates from the glory years and what glory it was. **NW**



## Tchaikovsky, Nielsen

Souvenir: Music for string orchestra

★★★★★

Blu-ray 5.1 DTS HD MA 24-bit/192kHz

PABD

**THIS INTERESTING DISC** contains chamber orchestra performances of Tchaikovsky's *Serenade for Strings* and *Souvenir de Florence*, plus two shorter works by Carl Nielsen including his *Suite for String Orchestra*. The Trondheim Soloists are an excellent group of young musicians who play with great passion and spirit.

The listener has a choice of 5.1, or 7.1 DTS, or two channel 24-bit/192kHz, with one track in 9.1 Auro-3D 24/96. The latter involves a nine-speaker array that gives the impression of height. To aid your 'visualisation' of the proceedings, a ground plan of the orchestral seating is included. **JH**



## Massive Attack

Blue Lines

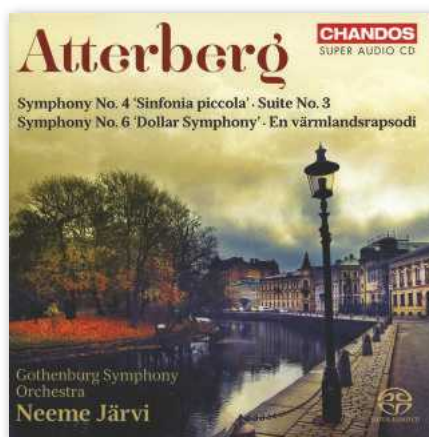
★★★★★

Double CD

EMI

**WITH THEIR FIRST** album in 1991, Massive Attack pretty much invented trip hop. Theirs was a particularly dark take on the genre, with skittering snare beats and looming, threatening deep bass, leavened only by some beautiful vocals from the likes of Horace Andy and Shara Nelson.

From the pulsing Billy Cobham sample that opens *Safe From Harm* to the synth-heavy *Hymn Of The Big Wheel*, the album packs in a feast of inventive beats and hummable tunes of which *Unfinished Sympathy* is a highlight. There's more than enough bounce to the slow tempos to keep heads a-nodding and feet a-tapping. **DO**



**This marks the first in a series of Atterberg's compositions**

## Atterberg

Symphonies 4 and 6  
Gothenburg Symphony Orchestra  
Neeme Järvi

★★★★★

SACD

Chandos CHSA 5116

**THIS IS THE** first release in a series devoted to the wonderful music of Kurt Atterberg. The two symphonies here are tuneful, colourful, well-crafted pieces that are both musically interesting and full of substance. The 6th symphony won a competition, and netted Atterberg a small fortune!

Järvi's performances are crisp and persuasive; his tempi are fast, although the music never really sounds rushed. The Chandos SACD recording is incredibly detailed and sonorous, with good depth, a wide dynamic range, and some impressively deep bass. **JH**



## The Blue Nile

A Walk Across The Rooftops

★★★★★

2 CD expanded edition

Virgin

**GLASGOW'S BLUE NILE** have released only four albums of peerless art-pop in almost 30 years. Led by Paul Buchanan's dark, rapturous voice, the group's 1984 debut sounded both sparse and yet lush at the same time. The follow-up, 1989's *Hats* also gets the expanded reissue treatment.

The synths were deployed with such rare grace that the album has an unusually elegant and timeless quality. The brittleness of the original recording benefits considerably from warm and sympathetic remastering. Among the bonus material, the previously unreleased *St Catherine's Day* is as beautiful as anything they recorded. **NW**



## Villa Lobos

Floresta Do Amazonas  
Anna Korondi (Soprano)  
Sao Paulo Choir and Symphony Orchestra

★★★★★

SACD

BIS

**FLORESTA DO AMAZONAS** is a vast fresco-like symphony for soprano soloist, choir and large orchestra. It dates from the late fifties, and was originally conceived as a movie score. Villa Lobos composed the music first, and was dismayed when told it would need to be cut and re-arranged to fit the film. As a result, it was not used. The music is celebratory and wide ranging in mood, with a broad expansive quality that creates sweeping vistas and vast open spaces.

The performance here is evocatively idiomatic, and the BIS SACD recording sounds pungent and open, with a wide dynamic range. **JH**



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# Great British Fake Off

In a world of rip-off Rolexes, bogus Botticellis and counterfeit clothing, it's good to know that the humble LP remains untainted by such nastiness, or does it asks **Lee Dunkley**

**H**onesty is always the best policy, right? I'm sure I am not alone when I say that there's nothing that enrages me more than being deceived or misled over the price of an item – or even worse, being sold counterfeit goods. The realisation that I've been duped leaves me mostly feeling rather foolish and powerless, of course, which inevitably leads to a mixture of emotions that usually manifest themselves in unattractive, yet justifiable responses ranging from being mildly annoyed, to resentment or worse – seething rage!

I am not a particularly outraged or angry person generally, but at the risk of beginning to sound like a *Daily Mail* reader, it can sometimes feel like we're living in the murky world of an episode of *Fake Britain* where unscrupulous crooks lurk around every corner coming up with ever more elaborate ways to rip us off, catch us out and dupe us out of our hard-earned cash. Where's Dominic Littlewood or Matt Allwright when we need them to navigate us through this minefield and help us not to get ripped off?

Forgeries of original artworks and copies of precious jewellery have existed throughout history, but I am neither looking to hang an original Rembrandt on my wall nor wear a Rolex on my wrist (although I'm sure owning either one would be rather nice), so I shouldn't need to

## Unscrupulous crooks lurk around every corner with ways to rip us off

about whether it's the genuine article or not. Or should I?

Despite a few trips to Asia I'm not much of a haggler when it comes to bargaining on the price of something – which I believe to be a wholly British trait that is part of our psyche and culture. I am happy to pay the realistic market price for an item in exchange for the goods or services. This has always seemed to be a perfectly fair and just way to go about things to me. But in a culture of online bidding auctions, high demand has seemingly resulted in some unscrupulous goings on targeted towards the inexperienced and vulnerable record collector that has left many of us questioning whether the rarity or original vinyl recording we are intent on making a bid on is a fake or not.

The news that 1,500 counterfeit vinyl records were seized recently from a home in Hertfordshire with an estimated value of around £20,000 if they had been genuine suggests that the problem is much larger than we

might think, and it's happening on our doorsteps. The fakers typically target LP and singles collectors in search of records over 20 years old, and discs by artists like Led Zeppelin, David Bowie and The Clash have all been seized in recent raids.

But it's not just collectors of old-school discs that are being duped, with fans of more recent artists like Eminem, Madonna and Michael Jackson also being targeted if the 4,000 discs that were seized from a home in Birmingham that included these artists among them is anything to go by. Some were being advertised as rare discs with prices as high as £99.

There is an increasing number of genuine record store dealers getting some kind of online presence now, so if you're after collectable or super-rare discs then it's a good idea to seek out your nearest store and wander in for a chat to discuss any authenticity doubts or concerns before buying online – check out our UK Record Store feature (back in the December issue) for five of our favourite independent secondhand stores.

As with spotting a genuine antique, it takes time for collectors to learn the craft, and record store staff will be able to point you in the right direction in order to help you minimise the risk of buying a dud. Select45rpm.com offers a comprehensive resource with hints and tips on how to spot a fake and is regularly updated with the latest information on what the tricksters are up to as well as a beginner's guide to collecting vinyl records alongside the pitfalls to look out for.

## Faking it

As hi-fi fans, we are continuously striving for a highest level of authenticity from the music we listen to in the way the presentation of our favourite artists' recordings are handled and conveyed to us by the components and speakers we select. It's rather ironic, then, that having gone to such considerable lengths to synergise and tweak our hi-fi setups in our quest for a convincing and believable sound that closely represents our idea of a live performance – or that gets us as close as possible to the studio master recording – to learn that the source material we're playing may not always be the original recording we thought it was. Stay vigilant! ●



**It might look legit, but how do you know if your vinyl is the real deal?**



**LEE DUNKLEY**  
Hi-Fi Choice editor

# One for (sm)all

In a world of large multi-driver loudspeakers, Acoustic Energy's AE1 laid down the blueprint for thoroughly modern mini-monitors, says **David Price**

**T**he eighties was the first decade of hi-fi as we know it today – things that are recognisably modern now began to be so in the eighties, and this holds for loudspeakers more than any other audio separates. Back in those heady days of Duran Duran and the Golf GTi, hi-fi downsized – thanks in no small part to the changing dimensions of the modern British abode. As property prices soared, newbuild houses got smaller and the number of 'Yuppie flats' exploded. This saw a gradual shift from the sort of speakers we'd seen in the seventies – with wide front baffles and myriad drive units – to small, minimalist two-way standmounters purposed to work in more compact environments.

From this change in living patterns came two iconic mini monitors. Wharfedale's little Diamond arrived first in 1984, and set the template for baby boxes making great sound. But while they sounded good on the end of a Rega and a NAD, higher-end systems were denied a great small speaker until the arrival of the Acoustic Energy AE1 in 1987. At the height of the eighties boom, when red braces-wearing, Porsche 911-driving city traders captured the zeitgeist, came this great symbol of hi-fi modernity. It sounded superb, and stood for a brave new hi-fi world.

## Goodbye seventies

While a handful of brilliant speakers came out of the decade that fashion forgot, the vast majority were the exact opposite. They were often three or four-way affairs, and most used rudimentary paper-coned midrange and bass units, and relatively crude paper or fabric dome tweeters. Polypropylene was thought an exotic cone material back then and that's only because it was Bextrene, which these days has been consigned to the great speaker skip in the sky.

As well as archaic drivers, seventies speakers generally sported what

would today be seen as appallingly loose, resonant cabinets. Thin chipboard was often the norm, usually not damped terribly well and only thinly veneered with the obligatory teak wood! This was further aggravated by wide front baffles, which did little for stereo imaging. Round the back, cheapo spring clip connectors were standard. The result was a woolly, ponderous and diffuse sound with low levels of transparency or insight.

Imagine then, how the arrival of the new Acoustic Energy AE1 must have felt? From this brand new English company came a strikingly small (295 x 180 x 255mm) miniature monitor loudspeaker that broke every rule in the book. Into the heavily damped and thick 22mm MDF-walled cabinets – finished in the *de rigueur* eighties crackle black – went a 25mm SEAS magnesium alloy dome tweeter. In the eighties, metal domes were cutting edge, the sound of the future,





and there was no way the AE1 could not have one! Then, below 3kHz, an Acoustic Energy-designed and built 90mm ceramic sandwich aluminium alloy cone mid/bass driver took over.

The straight-sided cone was spun from aluminium alloy with a graded thickness across its profile and then hard-anodised black on both sides. As the anodised layers take up one third of the cone's thickness, it was effectively a sandwich of alumina (aluminium oxide) and aluminium, said to be both stiffer and better damped than a pure metal. The cone shaped dust cap was glued to the

## Unlike so many other mini monitors, they show real grace under pressure

cone, which was driven by a 1.5in aluminium voice-coil former. The mid/bass driver was reflex loaded by two front-firing 40mm ports, and fed by a crossover mounted on the rear terminal panel – contrary to the fashion of the day it was quite a complex third-order affair with high quality iron-dust-cored inductors and low-loss polyester capacitors.

This all made for a quintessentially eighties mini monitor – one with a pretty smooth frequency response from 70Hz to 22kHz (+/-3dB) and a high power handling of 200W. But the AE1 was also an effort to drive, with a quoted sensitivity of 86dB/1W/1m, necessitating the use of a powerful transistor amplifier – tube amp owners need not apply! Not that this was an issue in the eighties, as everyone thought thermionic valves had gone the way of the dinosaur. So this was the very epitome of the modern reference monitor – it's hard to understate how bang up to date it looked in those distant days of 1987.

## Slave to the rhythm

If the AE1 looked like the future, imagine how it sounded. All those big, ponderous boxes with multiple drivers slipping in and out of phase with one another at random points couldn't hold a candle to this little loudspeaker's speed and dexterity. With its two, super-stiff drivers set into a small rigid cabinet, it comes over as a model of clarity, insight and resolution. But there's more – even by today's standards, it's still one of the most energetic boxes around. It

comes over as fizzing with enthusiasm, it has enormous vigour and brio. No matter what sort of music you feed it, the AE1 makes the music magic. No surprise perhaps that it was designed by Phil Jones, a bass guitar-mad musician.

In a sense, this musicality is one of the unintended consequences of the speaker. By designing out all the compromises and imperfections of the big boxes of the seventies, and going for a stripped-back, paired down approach, it showed just how much the complexity of its forebears sucked the life out of recordings. The primary object of the AE1 was, of course, neutrality and transparency – the ability to give an open window on the recording in a way that the BBC LS3/5a tried to, but never quite managed – but it also happened to make it far easier to focus on the rhythmic as well as the textural aspects of the music.

Still, its wonderfully fast attack transients, finely etched low-level detailing and purity of phase can't make up for its one handicap – size. The larger you make a speaker, the more problems you create for yourself in trying to rein in the cabinet and marry the multiple drivers, but you also give the design a chance to make deep, realistic bass. Being so small, of course, the AE1 deftly sidesteps those size-related pitfalls, but cannot change the law of physics and generate vast tracts of grumbling low frequencies. Acoustic Energy claims the speaker begins to tail off at 70Hz, which isn't a bad figure for such a small box, but still you'd never confuse this with a large floorstander!

In some respects the AE1 sounds like a physically small speaker – there's no getting away from this. Feed it some drum and bass from Alex Reece, in the shape of *Feel The Sunshine* and there are drums, but no

**The AE1s were as much of the eighties zeitgeist as Porsche's 911**



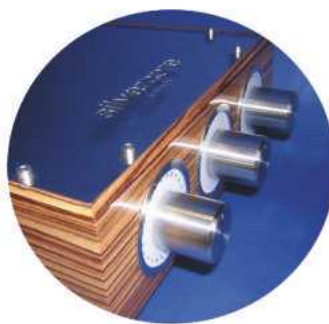
## BUYING

Because the AE1 has been around so long, there's no shortage of them knocking around the secondhand scene. An early pair can be had from under £300, if you're really looking – but expect to pay around £500 for an unmarked, boxed set with the optional wood veneer finish, or more if it's the newish AE1 Classic variant. Because many of them have seen use in studios as near-field monitors, many will be scratched or marked, or indeed hammered! The drive units are still available from Acoustic Energy, so it's not game over if a tweeter blows, but obviously a 'one domestic owner pair' is better than one that's had to really work for a living! Factor this into the price. Another consideration is where you're going to put them. The original AE1 speaker stands are no longer available new, but can be had used for under £100, and there's always the Partington Dreadnought stand if you can't find the AE version. AE1s demand heavy, mass-loaded stands, affixed to the floor as firmly as possible, between 16in and 24in high – depending on your listening position. A good pair of speakers on the right stands will give a memorable listening experience.

bass – well, not much, anyway! The bottom octave that floorstanding speaker users take for granted simply isn't there. But this doesn't spoil things; because everything else is so right about the AE1, your attention is simply drawn to what you can hear, which is music rendered in an open and engaging way, with fine image placement, excellent depth perspective and the ability to throw the soundstage far beyond the position of the speakers themselves. Connect the AE1s up to a good modern solid-state amplifier with a fair smattering of power – a Naim SuperNait being an ideal example – and you will be amazed by how loud these little boxes go without break up. Unlike so many other mini monitors, they don't compress things until they're on the ragged edge; they show real grace under pressure.

## Little box of tricks

One of the finest designs of its day, the AE1 harks back to a time when loudspeakers were a little more focused than they are now. It was a design that did many things brilliantly, yet had serious shortcomings in other respects. For that this little box will be fondly remembered and never forgotten. Indeed its manufacturer is so proud of it that, a few years ago, it started remaking the AE1 as the 'AE1 Classic', such was the demand. New or secondhand, it's little audio dynamite! ●



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# Synergy looms large

When he sat down to do an interconnect blind listening test, cable guy **David Price** realised it was time to take the effect of hi-fi wires more seriously than ever before

**L**est we forget, there was once a time when people didn't believe audio interconnect and loudspeaker cables made any difference. Back in the seventies – a period which by today's standards might be regarded as something akin to the Dark Ages, for a whole number of reasons – it was the general view that “a wire is a wire is a wire”.

Indeed, that might even be overstating the interest that people had in the effect that cables made, as – before the advent of the American Monster Cable and its little English brother QED 79-strand – I don't think anyone so much as thought about the subject. It was common practice to wire your hi-fi system with what was called ‘bell wire’, which was literally the cheapest run of electrically conductive string you could find at your local Tandy store to get your front door bell to indicate the presence of the postman.

The great cable debate started in the UK in around 1980, with audio journalists imploring bemused readers to invest the princely sum of 79p for every metre of cable they needed to link their amplifier to their loudspeakers – for that was how much QED 79-strand cost. It was seen as a ludicrous amount back then, but still those who took the plunge seemed to hear a difference. Since then, hi-fi hacks have spent ever more time talking about the effect that wires have on the sound of a hi-fi system.

## Even from my miles off-axis vantage point, I could hear big differences

hosted. Indeed it proved no less interesting than the first. Whereas the one I did in 2012 was of 12 different one metre interconnects, this was with six interconnects and their matching loudspeaker cables from the same manufacturer. I've often taken claims by cable makers that a one-make ‘loom’ is the only way to go, with a finger-full of sodium chloride, but as it transpired we heard some pretty marked differences, probably more pronounced than when listening just to interconnects.

It's not even as if I was on the listening panel! I've had that pleasure and privilege several times of late, but for both cable tests, I was the man with his hands on the controls. This meant cueing up the tracks, swapping cables and generally gopherring to make the test work, while Messrs Osborn, Dunkley and Reichert languished on my couch and hearing what I was hearing in a far more direct way. But even located far stage left, from my miles-off-axis vantage point, I could hear differences.

That includes yours truly, of course, and the group test in *HFC* 374 was the second *Blind Listening Panel* cable review I've

Fascinatingly, these weren't simply a case of one cable loom sounding brighter than another. Rather, the whole of the sound changed, from loom to loom, in a way that was so fundamental it has me wondering how on earth it could be so. For example, the Allegri String Quartet piece we used went through all sorts of contortions while running different cable looms. On the Atlas loom for example, the Allegri bods were assaulting the listening panel, beaming in space in one single plane towards the sofa, whereas the van den Hul wires (on page 112) practically dissolved the speakers out of the room and let the stringed instruments hover over quite a considerable depth, in front of and behind the boxes.

## Contrasting styles

Then there was the sense that the music really gelled together rhythmically on cable looms such as the van den Hul and Tellurium Q. It felt like Paul Simon's *Diamonds on the Soles of Her Shoes* was being played by a passionate group of people with the better cable looms, whereas others made them seem like they were earning £2 an hour and contemplating a career change to work at Sainsbury's stacking fruit! The effect really was so profound that it underlined just how important it must be for manufacturers developing new products, voicing a new loudspeaker design for example.

All this month's listening panelists came away agreeing that given a fixed system of source, amplification and loudspeakers, the wires that connect them have a profound effect on the sound that comes out of the end. This begs the question, how much to spend? The point is that the choice of hardware itself also has a great effect – indeed I'd say it is bigger still – so we shouldn't get obsessed by the world of wires. But suffice to say that remember to factor them into your upgrade plans and/or system buying choices in the first instance, and use your dealer to afford you the same opportunity of listening to a range of cable looms before you make any sort of serious buying choice. It's bonkers to bracket the cables off from the kit that they connect, think about the whole and go forth and let your ears decide which is right for you ●



**There's no denying it, picking the right cables is vital**



**DAVID PRICE**  
Hi-Fi Choice writer





# Bit part player

**David Price** fondly looks back at Marantz's first mass-market Bitstream machine, the early nineties' CD52 Special Edition Compact Disc player

**I**n the beginning, there were two very distinct tribes when it came to CD player design, namely the Philips-based machines and the Japanese ones. The former, such as the Philips CD100, had DACs that only ran up to 14-bit resolution, which was considered a bit odd given the format's 16-bit potential, but oversampled the digital datastream four times. The Japanese machines, meanwhile – such as the Sony CDP-101 – didn't oversample, but worked with the full 16-bits available.

As a result, they were very different, sonically with most people in this country preferring the sound of the Philips designs, feeling them to be more organic and tonally smoother than the rather brash, brusque Japanese machines. Generally, audiophiles who supported CD went for the Philips platform, and indeed so did a number of hi-fi manufacturers wishing to introduce their own players. Meridian, Mission and Marantz were but three examples of

this, but the latter company – a wholly owned subsidiary of Philips, naturally worked closest with the Dutch consumer electronics giant.

This meant that Marantz produced a shadow range of CD players – from the first CD63 (closely based on a Philips CD100) in 1983, the company carved a new identity taking a Philips chassis and tweaking it to create something that would appeal to audiophiles.

## War, what is it good for?

Early on in the life of Compact Disc, a specification war started. The Japanese, sensing that the Philips machines had a weak point in marketing terms by being 'only' 14-bit, started to promote the 'full 16-bit' nature of their decks. Despite the TDA1540 DAC chip fitted to the Philips players being a fine-sounding device, the Dutch company was forced to respond, and in 1984 launched the CD160, its first 16-bit player and with it Marantz produced its version of the same – the £200 CD273. Fitted with the TDA1541

16-bit, four times oversampling DAC, Philips could now compete in the specification sheet war.

Or so it thought! Japanese machines soon arrived claiming 18-bit, eight times oversampling – such as the Sony CDP-557ES – while the British designed Cambridge Audio CD2 claimed 16-bit, 64 times oversampling. These numbers were arrived at by using existing DACs in multiple configurations, letting manufacturers play the numbers game even more. Meanwhile, the average hi-fi buyer simply went for the one with the highest numbers – 18 x 8 had to be better than 16 x 4.

This was, of course, highly misleading as the bit-depth and oversampling arrangements of any CD player were not the sole determinants of its performance. This was down to more subtle things like the quality of the mechanism, master clock, filter, vibration isolation, passive componentry, power supply, and so on. But that didn't translate to sales brochures and by the end of the

eighties the CD player world was awash with misinformation.

In 1989, the whole wretched 'bits and oversampling' balloon was punctured with the advent of Bitstream. This new Philips technology was a completely different way of storing and processing the digital audio data inside the converter chip itself, and produced a different subjective performance, too – smoothing off what many saw as the rough edges of the Compact Disc medium at the time (see boxout). Bitstream revolutionised the digital world, making digital audio products cheaper and more palatable.

Marantz's first implementation of Bitstream came with its CD52 in 1990 – a good quality £250 machine that replaced the very similar-looking, but

## Most people in this country preferred the sound of the Philips designs

multibit DAC-equipped CD50. Now fitted was Philips' first (and now legendary) SAA7350GP DAC chip alongside the (then) latest Philips CDM12.1 swing arm mechanism. It brought new levels of refinement to budget CD players, which suffered from a coarse, fuzzy sound laced with distortion and 'digititis'. It is strange to say it now, but some late eighties budget multibit designs were so bright they could strip paint at 50 yards!

Ever since the advent of the CD273 'Special Edition' some three years earlier, Marantz had always done a tweaked version of its stock player. Designer Ken Ishiwata freely admits that the 'SE' idea was hatched to sell off some stock cluttering up the Marantz warehouse. By retrofitting a few choice capacitors, copper screws and giving the machine a stick-on fascia badge, players could be made to look and sound more desirable.

## Keeping it simple

When it came to the new 52, Ishiwata had a great machine to work with, and so he did with a smattering of fancy Elna and Silmic capacitors here and some OFC wiring there. No changes were made to the basic player though – in modern terms, the CD52SE feels a very crude thing to operate, its casework and chassis are a festival of plastic, with an ugly fluorescent display that seemed compulsory back then. The disc tray is

also cheap and cheerful, but at least you get very fast disc access from the era when CD players used bespoke CD mechanisms, and not something originally designed for reading a DVD-ROM inside a PC.

Sonically the CD52SE really impressed. In 1991 it brought the best of both worlds to budget CD sound – first, you had the clarity, openness and freedom from distortion of the new Bitstream convertor, and second you had the extra subtlety, warmth and depth garnered by the Ken Ishiwata modifications package. The result was a great-sounding budget product. Although not as good as £1,000 designs, this was probably the first £300 machine that you could go back to having lived with a high-end CD player. It wasn't searingly uncouth, and moreover it has a really musical character of its very own that just made listening fun.

You could put on any decent recording, and compared with mainstream mid-price multibit machines, the CD52SE's midband felt cleaner and more expansive, with a little more depth. There was less of what used to be called 'digital glare' across the upper midband, less of a sense that vocals and snare drums had been plated with chrome and then had a bright light shone on them! Treble was impressive, with lots of space and filigree detail, and less of a feeling of roughness. Only in the bass did it appear to let the side down, being a touch light compared with some price rivals, but it was always very tuneful.

This all made for a wonderfully accessible, affordable silver disc spinner that gave cash-strapped digital audiophiles a true taste of the high end for not much money. Owning a Marantz CD52SE at the time was akin to driving a VW Golf GTi – it showed you knew what you were doing when it came to choosing an affordable, yet high-performance product. Magazines raved about it, dealers couldn't get enough, and Marantz finally began to emerge

**The era-defining CD52SE sounded great, but the Golf GTi Mk II looked better**

## BITSTREAM – HOW IT WORKS

Before the advent of Bitstream, multibit DACs stored the 16-bit digital word in 16 different physical locations in the convertor chip, selectively emptying them to deliver the final number to the outside world. But by using clever digital signal processing, a stream of 16-bit digital words running at CD's standard 44.1kHz sampling frequency could be transformed into a stream of one-bit words running at a much higher sampling frequency of 11.3MHz (256 times that of the equivalent multibit).

Because this approach created extra noise as a result of the word length reduction, noise-shaping was used to make it appear at very high frequencies that could then be filtered out.

When Bitstream was introduced in 1989, Philips claimed that this was a major breakthrough for CD sound, but another less well-publicised benefit was that 1-bit DACs were less complex and, therefore, cheaper to produce than multibit DACs, making Bitstream a genuine winner however you looked it.

from the shadows of its parent company to really make its own presence felt in the hi-fi marketplace. Marantz sold them by the warehouse load, and did a quick tweak with a 'Mk II' version late in its life just to keep the production lines running at full pelt. The spin put on this at the time was that the standard non-SE Mk II had most of the tweaks of the Mk I SE, and it was certainly an improvement, but it wouldn't quite have been worth selling your Mk I to get.

## Music maker

Whichever incarnation you decide to go for, the Marantz CD52 is a very special machine in the great hi-fi scheme of things. Today it still stands as a very enjoyable-sounding music maker with bags of character, and historically it has been applauded for bringing decent-sounding digital discs to the masses for the first time. Today, the good news is that you'll be able to pick up a good working example for far less than £100 – which is a brilliant bargain if it's a cheap CD source you seek ●



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PURIST AUDIO DESIGN CABLES

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# A certain *je ne sais quoi*...

What is it about some tunes that make you want to listen to them over and over again? For **Patrick Cleasby** Daft Punk's *Random Access Memories* is top of the pops...

**W**e've all had them. A tune – quite often the lead track from an album – that is so compelling we are impelled to return the needle to the start of the record and listen again, or more mundanely, press repeat. It's a mark of the magic that the artist has put into creating something truly remarkable that one is forced to immediately revisit it. A friend of mine experienced this effect with *Woman in Chains* from Tears For Fears' *The Seeds Of Love*, I spent most of 1989 getting up every day to the Pet Shop Boys' *Left To My Own Devices* (single version). In 1997 I had a car commute that was exactly three plays of *Paranoid Android* long, and in 2005 I had Bloc Party's *Tulips* on my iPod every day walking to work.

So it seems they come along about every eight years or so. My current one is *Giorgio By Moroder* from Daft Punk's brilliant *Random Access Memories* album. Yes, the influence of Chic is heavy on the album, with Nile Rogers all over it, and *Get Lucky* might be more eminently danceable, but *GBM* has something special. It has Giorgio Moroder!

It may be as simple as the fact that in place of the customary Vocoded voices the track bears the calm, reflective tones of the legendary Italian (who did so much to lay the foundations of electronic music) intoning snippets of his history over a nine minute epic that zooms

## Moroder's *From Here to Eternity* was one of my formative hi-fi experiences

from lounge to freakout. Apart from the charm of Giorgio there are also the elements that thread throughout the whole record – an unfashionable adherence to real musicianship and an insistence on impeccable standards of audio quality, which makes the whole record a hi-fi dream.

### Je t'aime la musique!

It is at this point I should mention that listening to Giorgio Moroder's *From Here to Eternity* on vinyl and on headphones was one of my formative hi-fi experiences. In 1978 I was 12 (the Daft Punks would have been infants then) and at a friend's house in France, seeing a proper turntable for the first time and listening to an incredibly otherworldly suite of music. 35 years later I am listening to another on expensive headphones – *Random Access Memories* as a 24-bit, 88,200 KHz sampling download, available exclusively on the day of release from French site Qobuz, (although HDTracks will no doubt follow on).

This is a big deal because the robot duo have taken pains, not only in perfectly executing the futuristic retro

that is their musical hallmark, but also in the similarly retro methods used to record and master the result of their tasteful eclecticism. Qobuz has thankfully posted a 22-minute filmed interview with the Parisian mastering engineer who completed the process, Antoine Chabert or 'Chab', which does much to reassure how carefully this album was made and how sure we can be that the high-resolution download is the version to go for.

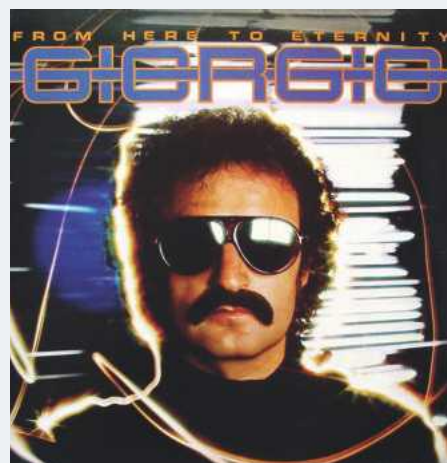
For the benefit of those who do not speak French I can summarise the interesting findings. It is already apparent from other interviews that the duo were trailing across America from collaborator to collaborator, multiple reels of analogue tape in tow. The reason for the bizarre joint Bob Ludwig/Chab mastering credit is that the venerable Bob was employed to make a high-resolution digital transfer of the tapes. They didn't want to fly them back to Paris, suspicious of the negative effects of X-rays.

The resolution of 24/88.2 was arrived at since that was what Ludwig said sounded best in his transfer chain, and he did very little except execute the conversion – three tracks had minor equalisation changes applied via adjustments to the tape machine only.

What happened in France was the minute processes by which the legendarily persnickety Parisians adjusted the sound, track by track, with small amounts of compression – to add 'punch' – felt to be lacking from the transfer. There is an obvious awareness that the wonderful dynamics of the record didn't want to get lost – the mastering engineer's job isn't to make things sound worse!

Most remarkably Chab avows that in an uncommon turn of events for a mastering engineer he was moved to take his work home with him to listen again, and dance – exactly the phenomenon that so many have observed of their favourite RAM tracks. (Well, just *Get Lucky* up to this point...)

He says that the 24/88.2 version is the one they slaved over and from which all the others (CD, Mastered for iTunes, MP3, Vinyl) were derived. So, it makes sense to make the effort and procure RAM from France or the US and listen to it on the best playback platform you can find. Get to it! ●



**Giorgio Moroder:** a look that every 12-year old should aspire to



**PATRICK CLEASBY**  
Technology boffin



By modern standards the Sondek's overall tonal character was very warm

# The one and only

**David Price** looks back at what's surely one of the most significant turntable releases ever and one that changed our thinking – Linn's loved and loathed Sondek LP12

**I**n the great scheme of belt drive turntables, the Sondek was an elegant evolution of thinking first seen in the original AR deck, and crystallised in the Thorens TD150 – offering a precision of construction and attention to detail that few have matched since its launch back in 1973. Devoid of fripperies or gimmickry, the straight-laced LP12 introduced little that was radical in design terms. Rather, it was simply engineering 'best practice' of the day done to painstakingly high standards, with a patented 'single-point' bearing. Despite this, it went on to forge out an entirely new role for the hi-fi turntable in general, thanks to its own – and its creator's special endeavours.

By the late seventies the Sondek had already become the personification of the belt drive 'super deck', and by the early nineties it was surely the most famous hi-fi turntable in the world.

At the time of its inception, lest we forget, almost no one in the hi-fi firmament took seriously the idea that

the source was the most important link in the hi-fi chain. And so it fell to a young Ivor Tiefenbrun to drive the point home, but it wasn't just his obvious erudition that popularised the idea of 'garbage in, garbage out', it was because he was absolutely correct in what he said.

## You spin me round...

Earlier generations of hi-fi writers had assumed that turntables needed to do nothing apart from revolve at the right speed in a quiet and stable way. Linn showed that more was needed, not least to be able to present a high precision closed loop between the turntable and tonearm in order for the cartridge to do its job.

This done, the deck would provide a high-quality signal with which the subsequent links in the system chain would work to make a great sound. If the source wasn't up to scratch, Ivor would constantly tell anyone who'd listen, the speakers couldn't make up for it later. This reasoning now seems such a 'no-brainer' that it's hard to

appreciate that 40 years ago it was heresy to a great many people – especially loudspeaker manufacturers!

Interestingly and importantly, however, Tiefenbrun didn't abandon his prized LP12 while building up his company's product portfolio; the deck received a series of upgrades, which showed that Linn took the sonics of the deck extremely seriously. It was this rolling improvement programme that was to make the deck so enduring. An original early seventies sample sounds different to the latest build – yet curiously somehow similar. As such, many myths and legends have grown up around the LP12.

The Sondek is an independently sprung subchassis design, originally with an AC synchronous motor driving a heavy mazak (alloy) platter, sitting atop a machined inner platter which in turn rests on a custom, high-quality bearing. The bearing is set into a subchassis, which rests on three springs that can be adjusted for height and bounce. The subchassis

also holds the armboard, which Linn supplies in a variety of guises; the original boards were painted MDF. Around all this is a veneered wood plinth; most earlier Sondeks for many years came in Afromosia – a type of African rosewood – although Black Ash was available.

In its original 1973 guise – complete with smoked dustcover – the Sondek was a sumptuous-sounding device with a big, fat bass and sugary sweet midband. Treble was silky and soft, which meant the deck's overall tonal character was very warm by modern standards – and indeed those of the current production LP12. What really impressed was the sense of rhythms that the turntable served up; it seemed better able to extract the 'groove' from music than practically

## It was a sumptuous sounding device with a fat bass and sugary sweet midband

any other deck on the market back then. This made it wonderfully entertaining to listen to, and its superiority over rivals made some believe it had a magic quality to it.

Over the course of the decade a few changes were made – mostly in 1974 (from serial number 2000), with new main bearing liner material, a strengthened subchassis, a modified motor control printed circuitboard and a different mains switch fitted. Then in 1979 the deck got more elegant spring-loaded lid hinges, but it wasn't until 1981 (at 27,000) that the deck really got its first major mod – one which Linn decided to give a name. The much-acclaimed Nirvana spring and motor mod kit (from 32,826) gave a tighter and grippier sound, which stripped the deck of a lot of its bass overhang and syrupy warmth. Then Linn announced the Valhalla crystal-driven power supply board (38,794), which gave a profound improvement to the overall clarity and detail of the sound, again making it sound leaner – although it was still miles away from the (then) new Compact Disc.

## Mods and mockers

Eighties mods continued the theme, making the deck sound ever more neutral and better resolved. The plinth was braced more stiffly (53,000), the subchassis strengthened (54,101) and the suspension springs

stiffened. A better bearing arrived in 1987 (70,000), along with a superior armboard (79,160), but it wasn't until 1990 that the Lingo power supply arrived – this was the single biggest upgrade to date, giving a far more precise, CD-like sound without losing the charm of vinyl. Still, by this time some Linn lovers were beginning to think the deck was just a little too close to the demon digital for comfort.

Linn was on a run, and not long after in 1992, the Cirkus bearing and subchassis package (90,582) was introduced, and to date this is still the most important mod to the deck, taking it away from euphony to accuracy in one seamless leap. It worked wonders for its information retrieval, also improving the soundstaging dramatically too. Around the same time, Linn offered the option of its Trampolin kit, an upgraded baseboard to replace the hardboard base. After a very busy schedule of modifications, the company then went quiet. Admittedly, an early nineties Cirkus LP12 was still completely price-competitive with its rivals, but by the middle of the next decade this wasn't so. Just at the time when many thought Linn had abandoned the LP12 in favour of the (then) more popular CD12 variant, more news arrived...

First was the Keel subchassis option in 2006. Costing over £2,000 it raised some eyebrows – but correctly identified one of the big weakness of the deck, its resonant, overly compliant steel subchassis. Although everyone loved the sonic improvement it wrought, many questioned Linn's intentions on the pricing – the new subchassis cost more than a whole new deck (with the old subchassis fitted). More mutinous murmurings arrived with 2009's Radikal DC motor, which was even more expensive than the Keel. Both upgrades made

## THE FACTS

There are now a great many unofficial LP12 modification packages, from bespoke plinths and top plates to a plethora of DC motor upgrades and power supply tweaks. On top of all this, the introduction of the Keel has spurred a wealth of far cheaper imitators, many made from carbon fibre rather than OE-spec aluminium. Many of the mods packages are quite successful. Ivor Tiefenbrun himself seems reasonably sanguine that his baby has spurred such a vibrant aftermarket accessories scene, while insisting (of course) that the original Linn spec is best. Certainly you can make your Linn sound different to stock with, say, top-plate mods such as those from tiger paw – but it does beg the question why you shouldn't just go out and buy a more neutral sounding turntable in the first place? Certainly, there's a hardcore of Linn LP12 owners who want to stay committed to the deck, and here is where these various mods make sense.

major, profound changes, taking the sound much closer to the ultra-clean, sparkly sound of SMEs and Avids of the day, without losing the LP12's trademark musicality. It made for a beautiful sound, but also made the deck a lot less accessible in its highest form.

## The in sound from far out

The LP12 still sells, but in nowhere near the numbers of yesteryear. Happily though, this still means any LP12 owner can get easy access to a comparatively large number of dealers who can service the deck, expertly yet reasonably inexpensively. It also means that anyone wishing to buy secondhand can pick up one at a decent price, simply because of the relatively large number around. You can drop between £150 and £15,000 on one depending on age, spec and condition, and you'll be guaranteed to end up with something that is at the very least interesting – and at best breathtakingly musical to listen to. If you still haven't heard an LP12, you owe it to yourself to do so ●

**Earlier Sondeks were available in an Afromosia or black ash finish**





# Shiver me timbers!

Forget Captain Jack Sparrow and Captain Pugwash, there's a new pirate in town. But **Richard Stevenson** is more interested in hi-res music than rum or swashbuckling...

I have become a pirate. While I am not unfamiliar with flouncing around wearing nothing but a frilly shirt and a parrot, this time it's for real. I have spent the last 20 years fighting the good fight against music piracy and written countless articles suggesting hanging, drawing and quartering for copyright offenders. My moral standpoint would make Mary Whitehouse look like a campaigner for social liberalism. But I have succumbed. I have downloaded an album via a link in a newsgroup. For free. That thump was me falling from grace.

So why this change of heart to a life of roguish behaviour and a predilection for saying "Arrr!" before ordering a pint? Two reasons; necessity and *cogito nullen crimen*. That is, I do not believe I have committed a crime, yer honour.

Necessity because if you live in the UK then legitimate access to high-resolution audio files is woefully lacking. Yes the likes of Linn and B&W have brought us a plethora of diddy-diddy hi-fi muzak in hi-res, but it's not exactly mainstream stuff. Go to US vendors like HDtracks and you will find a good back catalogue of classic artists in 96/24, 176/24 and 192/24 and even a reasonable selection of new material in 44kHz/24. Yet precious little of it is available if you are looking to purchase from a UK IP address. This, says the pop-up blocking the check-out, is

**All I have done is replicate data I already own for my own personal use**

due to licensing issues in your region. These are the very same licensing issues that ensured the Pandora music service was prohibited access by European IP addresses after only a year of being available as a beta in the UK. Interestingly, Pandora's unique method of suggesting new music based on analysing the genomic structure of your favourite tracks was directly responsible for me spending a fortune on new CDs that year. Oh the irony.

Specifically HDtracks blocked my attempted purchase of The Eagles' *Hotel California* in 192/24. Yet after some searching of torrent and usenet groups I found it readily available. So, running the risk of having Sussex Constabulary prepping to keel haul a confessing pirate around the police social club minibus, I admit I acquired this hi-res album by nefarious means.

But have I committed copyright theft at all? I have purchased *Hotel California* at least three times already. Once on vinyl, once on CD and once on DVD-A. In fact it is the DVD-A stereo master at 192/24 that is widely available to download as an iso disk image file. All I have actually

done is replicated data I already own for my own personal use. If the law says that this is copyright theft, then I would argue that ripping your own CDs to iTunes and then syncing them to an iPod is actually copyright theft, but twice over.

Even if I didn't own the DVD-A, would downloading a 192/24 version be copyright infringement if I had already purchased the vinyl or the CD? If the different format is the issue then surely syncing your lossless ripped CDs to iCloud and then streaming back in 256kbps is copyright theft as you are receiving content in a format you didn't already own? Perhaps the real question is whether you actually own your digital media at all?

## Die Hard with a vengeance

Bruce Willis was allegedly miffed by this very issue last year and was reported to be considering a legal case against Apple as iTunes' T&Cs prohibited him from leaving his extensive iTunes library to his kids in his will. Last month a federal judge in the US shut down and fined a website that enabled the sale of pre-owned digital music files. ReDigi, which provided a platform to buy and sell pre-owned iTunes tracks, was declared unlawful despite ensuring sold-on tracks could no longer be accessed by the original owner. It's a complicated case, but further underlines the precedent that you cannot sell-on or even pass-on your legitimately purchased iTunes digital media. Could Apple's huge net deposit of tax dollars into the US economy have anything to do with the outcome of this case, I wonder?

Against this high-profile madness, it is surely no surprise that the pirate music market absolutely dwarfs the legal online music business. Is it any wonder that subscription content services like Spotify, Steam (for PC games) and Sky are so popular? A considerable part of their appeal, and perhaps even their business model, is that they are so much easier than searching for and downloading content illegally.

Call me old fashioned, but I still want to buy and own my music in the highest quality available and Spotify fails spectacularly on both counts. Until that changes it's a pirate's life for me, me hearties! ●



**Hotel California, which Richard now owns in four formats, but does he really own it at all?**



**RICHARD STEVENSON**  
Hi-fi writer, pirate and bass head

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# Mini adventure

Now that Sony has finally ceased MiniDisc player production, **David Price** recalls the rise and fall of the once futuristic format...

**S**omewhere up there in hi-fi heaven, tucked away in a cobweb-covered cupboard, sits a MiniDisc machine whirring away. You'd have to squeeze past some dusty Sony Elcaset decks, a Sanyo nicotine-stained Stereo 8 machine and a brace of old Philips cassette recorders to find it, but there it will be – glinting in the ethereal light forever more.

It's amazing to think that MD is over 20 years old, but then again just try and use one and you realise how anachronistic it feels now. If we want to digitally copy our CDs these days, we feed them into our computer, whereupon an application opens up and chews through the digits at around 10 times the speed of a real-time recording. With MiniDisc (until the end of its life), real-time was all you got, but it still seemed a wonderfully slick bit of technology.

Then there was 'MD Text', the amazing feature that let you label your discs. Some people spent hours scrolling through the buttons on those chunky remote controls, titling not just the album name but the songs and artists too. Didn't they have anything else better to do? As a major

concession, the likes of Sony began fitting computer keyboard sockets, so you could type in the track titles even faster. It seemed like the stuff of science fiction – if Jules Verne had been around in the late nineties, he'd doubtless be beguiled by it. After all, what's the point of time travel if your Manic Street Preachers album is correctly labelled?

As for the sound, well it wasn't very good for a very large part of MD's life. The early machines were just plain dreadful – imagine a CD playing out through a kazoo. Unsurprisingly, not a lot of people bought them in the UK, even if the portables (an optimistic term for the very first example of the breed, the Sony MZ-1) were big in Japan (literally). The hi-fi press reviewed swathes of them, predictably reporting they didn't sound as good as rival Digital Compact Cassette decks, even if they loved the futuristic 'random access' orientation they offered.

## The ATRAC fightback

In 1996 Sony launched a new range of MiniDisc machines sporting something called ATRAC 3.5. Yes, it sounds like another arcane acronym,

but in this instance it really meant something. Back when the company's engineers actually had time to work on audio products (just imagine!), some white-coated Japanese boffins had switched on their calculators and devised a music coding algorithm that sounded half decent.

Previous incarnations of Sony's Adaptive Transform Acoustic Coding had – in the process of squishing about 650MB of audio data from a CD down to 140MB for MD – managed to adapt the music into something altogether less satisfying. MiniDisc had previously been a sort of foggy facsimile of what it was supposed to represent, but finally ATRAC 3.5 managed to join the dots in the right places and make things sound vaguely like music.

In today's terms, you'd be talking along the lines of 320kbps AAC, which is very respectable if you're not getting too deep into the auditory experience. The surface of the sound is pretty much identical to that of an uncompressed CD – maybe even ever so slightly tonally warmer – it's just when you listen 'into' the recording attentively that you start to find things are a little blurred, diffuse and

**Sony's 1998 MDS-JA3000ES was one of the best-looking hi-fi MiniDisc machines, from the glory days before MP3 killed off the format**







phases. Dynamics suffer slightly, and there's a sense of some missing low-level detail and air.

Because ATRAC (like MP3, AAC and WMA) is compressed, it has to effectively manipulate the music to fit a finite (and limited) storage space, so if the music is very simple there's far less sense of compression. For example, a gentle solo classic guitar recording will get less apparent processing than a crescendo from a recording of *The William Tell Overture*.

### Changing fortunes

By the time ATRAC 3.5 was introduced, the idea that MiniDisc sounded bad had become set in audiophile minds. So it took a long time for the message to get through that the format had finally become listenable. The company launched a couple of tasty ES-series machines, such as the MDS-JA30ES and '50ES, which boasted beautiful build, high-quality DACs and 20-bit analogue-to-digital convertors, for those recording from the line or microphone inputs. Suddenly MiniDisc offered better specs than Compact Disc.

The ES machines were expensive of course, weighing in at between £600 and £1,000 in the mid nineties. What Sony needed was a machine that gave similar sonics, but at a far more affordable price – and in 1996 this finally arrived in the shape of the MDS-JE500. This was a diminutive, slimline machine selling for 'just' £300, and offered hitherto unknown sound from MD thanks to its (then) brand new CXD2650R ATRAC 4.0 chip. If version 3.5 was a significant advance, then 4.0 was the giant leap forward; suddenly MiniDisc sounded warm, musical and far less processed than it ever had before. I remember Sony marketing men being genuinely excitedly about it, which wasn't the tone usually expected from such a big company with so many projects on the go at any one time.

Sony's portable players also improved dramatically and the company introduced a range of really rather competent car MiniDisc head units, which finally began to push the format forward in the UK. At last, the sound was right, the products were right and the prices too. In its native Japan, where MiniDisc had been enthusiastically adopted as a mobile music source for the country's many millions of train-travelling rush hour commuters, the format had become ubiquitous by around 1994.

In the UK, however, very few people really knew about it as late as 1997. The MDS-JE500, and the decks that

### Suddenly MiniDisc sounded warm, musical and far less processed

followed it (the '510 etc.) really began to push the format out into the public at large. Sony started selling more prerecorded MiniDiscs – you could finally walk into a major music store and buy them off-the-shelf.

Sony followed up with more high-end machines, such as the MDS-JA5000ES, which sported a further refinement of ATRAC 4.0 (ATRAC DSP Type-R), and gave excellent sound (few would be able to identify it as MiniDisc, if listening blind). It produced an even wider range of portables, compact midi-sized machines and increased its integration with computers – in Japan Sony actually sold a VAIO PC with a MiniDisc drive built in. And then a range of affordable audiophile machines, such as the MDS-JB900QS arrived, offering styling and finish similar to top ES machines for under £300. By 1999, there had never been a better time to invest in the format.

Sadly though, consumers didn't see it like this. MiniDisc was now a mature, professional format selling into a

### THE FACTS

Work on MiniDisc began in 1986 and brought together various different technologies and patents. The 2.5in square 140MB disc held a CD's worth of music, compressed by a factor of five by Sony's Adaptive Transform Acoustic Coding system (ATRAC). The disc itself was a variation on conventional magneto-optical recording, in which data is recorded using a semiconductor laser at high power together with a magnetic head. Launched in 1992, the ATRAC compression system improved immensely over the years. Version 1.0 was noisy, with obvious compression and lossy artefacts. ATRAC 2 greatly improved on this, taking away strange whistles and chirps, but was hardly a nice listen. ATRAC 3.5 added an input width of 20-bits, and was the first truly listenable incarnation of the codec. ATRAC 4 did processing entirely at 24-bit resolution with an input width of 20-bits. ATRAC 4.5 arrived on the high-end MDS-JA50ES, and then came ATRAC DSP Type-R, offering a cleaner treble. Hi-MD followed in 2004 with 1GB of storage, offering up lossless linear PCM at last.

market that was actually quite ephemeral and fashion-driven. MP3 had been quietly rising in people's collective consciousness, and when it became clear to the world that you could a) play your music on your computers, b) download it for free from Napster and c) buy tiny little players – far smaller and lighter than an MD portable – MiniDisc didn't stand a chance. The rise of the Diamond Multimedia Rio and players from Creative Labs, Samsung and Philips dealt MiniDisc a mortal injury.

### This is the end...

Sony valiantly tried to fight back with Hi-MD, doing precisely what it should have done five years earlier, which was to use a high-density disc capable of storing far more music, and recording uncompressed too. Hi-MD was a brilliant little format, backwards compatible with MD (it would record and play in standard MD format) yet capable of real 'CD-quality' sound.

Sadly though, the world wasn't listening. The arrival of the Apple iPod in 2003 drove a stake through Sony's format, skewering it until there was no more life left. It was game over for the format, and its creator decided that profit lay in other areas, and the ascent of the Sony PlayStation began. Now, Sony has made its last ever MiniDisc machine – some are surprised that it has managed to last this long, but that's a testament to its popularity in Japan. The discs stay in production, but it's only a matter of time before they too ascend to hi-fi heaven ●

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# What's in a word?

Language is constantly evolving and the hi-fi world is no exception. However, says **Tim Jarman**, it's when words are devalued that it becomes annoying

**H**i-fi, like many specialist activities, evolves its own language so that some quite complex ideas can be communicated quickly and easily to users at all levels of understanding. When coined, the various words and phrases carry real meaning, however, sadly many are then de-valued by inappropriate or excessive use. Take the late sixties term: transcription, which used to describe a turntable of the most superior type, good enough that it would seem to transcribe the contents of records onto another medium in the form of a master recording. This phrase conjures up mental images of console-mounted EMTs and rumbling great Garrard 301s, but before too long it came to be attached to all kinds of mediocre tat and became worthless. Anything that you couldn't stack 10 records on became a transcription unit and the term fell from favour.

Fast forward to the nineties and the word of the moment was reference. This is also a highly evocative term, making one think that a reference amplifier or loudspeaker was something that you would find in the development labs and research facilities of electronics manufacturers, record companies and universities, carefully used as an index of performance against which all lesser equipment is judged. If you have the reference you have the equipment whose performance is beyond doubt and absolutely correct, you

**High end was what those with limitless space and budgets would have had**

can't get any better than that. Of course, this was far from being true. Reference audio components do exist, but they are a

far cry from many of the run of the mill items that once had this golden word screen printed onto their fascias.

## High end's fall from grace

It is sometimes hard to see when a particular phrase or term is being over used until it falls from favour, but for the hi-fi buyer of today here's one to look out for: high end. Years ago one used to hear about high-end gear, but it was seldom actually encountered. High end was what people with limitless space and budgets would have had, a mixture of professional and broadcast gear and custom-built items whose performance supposedly transcended what us mere mortals could achieve with our high-street systems, but whose bulk, intricacy and price made them irrelevant to all but the dedicated few. Even statement pieces such as the Sony Esprit (pictured), the B&O 8000 and the Revox Evolution weren't high end back then, despite the painful obsession with perfection that their



designers had obviously endured. Fast forward to 2013 and you don't get very far through the audio scene before you meet a "high end" claim. This time though the components to which it is attached are often quite meek and ordinary, the sorts of things that a sensible audiophile may well choose to buy. Small, inoffensive and neat, they may well be good products, but they are most definitely not high end if we are to use the term in its original context. True high end is big, ugly, demanding, expensive and frankly a bit silly; the sorts of setup that one sometimes sees at the larger hi-fi shows that makes one stop, gawp and then wonder if anyone ever actually buys this stuff. The high end exists to set a limit value as to what is possible, to set an end point for the law of diminishing returns. It is not simply the amplifier with bigger valves or a few extra knobs, the loudspeaker with an unusual driver configuration or the turntable that can take a slightly longer arm.

## So what's next?

If even I've spotted it, it is probably the case that the days of high end as useable advertising hyperbole are probably numbered. Assuming that this is the case, it leaves us free to speculate about what the next term will be that is attached to everything with aspirations above the bottom rung of the audio ladder. It's probably something that is in use already, albeit in a minor sort of way, and something that is easily associated with an up and coming technology. High definition is certainly a phrase that has what it takes; it has consumer resonance and would fit in well if hi-res downloads ever gain traction in the mass market. Why put up with a stodgy old pair of loudspeakers when you can upgrade to a high-definition model, as evidenced by a few extravagant brochure claims and a prominent emblem on the grille? If this happens I will, for once, be ahead of the game – my dear old Beolab 5000 was described in its catalogues as a high-definition amplifier, and that was way back in 1967! ●

**Sony's Esprit may be a statement piece, but high end it ain't**



**TIM JARMAN**  
Hi-Fi Choice writer



# In the Naim of love

Want a charismatic, cult amplifier designed back in the dark days of the Cold War? Naim's original Nait is just that, says **David Price**

**D**o you remember the eighties? They were certainly rather turbulent times, and a little extreme. In a way, the products that came from that decade reflect this, and the original Naim Nait is a prime example. Small, quirkily styled and unusually engineered, you'd never call it mainstream. Yet the concept appealed to purist audiophiles who wanted to spend a fair whack (£253 in 1983) on a small box that looked about as cool as a microcomputer power supply unit, but sounded really special in its own unique way.

"We wanted, with Linn, to offer an entry-level system to set the reference and help expose source-first expenditure philosophy within system hierarchy", Naim Audio explained to *Hi-Fi Choice*.

Design-wise, the original Nait was an essay in studied minimalism. It was a Julian Vereker design, along with the Naim production team, and basically took stock bits used in the

company's pricier products, but substituted a low-cost volume and balance pot and a special toroidal transformer. Unintentionally perhaps, it turned into a powerful anti-fashion statement. Lest we forget, practically every Japanese amplifier of the day was huge and festooned with power meters, knobs and switches, while even the Brit competition wasn't exactly stripped to the bone. The Nait's closest price rival was the A&R Cambridge (Arcam) A60, and this was a full-length affair that came in a wooden sleeve and had tone controls and even a treble filter at one stage!

## Against the grain

By contrast, the Naim didn't have one single superfluity – indeed its balance control was a crude trim pot that worked on just one channel and gave 3dB of attenuation. It appeared as a plastic stalk jutting out of the front fascia panel, but Vereker didn't seem to mind – it was his idea after all! Another stand-out feature was its

paltry power output. At a time when manufacturers were falling over themselves to deliver products that churned out more watts per channel, here was something that produced less! Naim never published power output figures for the Nait, but it was close to 6W RMS per side. Back then, that was tantamount to sticking your underpants on your head, pencils in your nose and shouting, "wibble".

Sonically, the Nait sounded very distinct, in a good and a bad way. Rather like a single-ended tube amplifier, they were very upfront, direct and lucid. Music seemed to flood forth out of your system, almost as if you were right in front of the musicians' monitor PA on stage. What you got was a slightly narrow bandwidth sound that seemed to focus all of its attention into the midband, which was riveting to listen to. Whatever you put on, the wee Naim seemed to get under the skin of the recording and into the musicians' very souls. In this respect, it was



Unlike hi-fi in the eighties, the Nait was small and simple

sublime, and even today the Salisbury company is proud of it.

In some other senses it was altogether less amazing. Admittedly, it did have excellent load-driving ability for a six watter (it could drive relatively inefficient Linn Kans – albeit in smallish rooms – after all), but this still wasn't – and isn't – any substitute for the 60W-plus you get from a

## Naim's original Nait amplifier is still peerless in its own crazy way

modern entry-level amplifier. A consequence of this was that bass power of the original Nait was pretty middling. Although always a tuneful and supple-sounding design, it was definitely easier to hear what the bass guitar player was playing towards the top of the instrument's range. And as for low notes on church organs, they came over with the power and impact of a feather striking lambswool. Once again, the Nait was great within its comfort zone, but this was a lot narrower than many other designs of the day – and even more so now.

### Not so smooth

There were other downsides, too. Even when not challenged with insensitive loudspeakers or driving basslines, the baby Naim could never be described as 'an old smoothie'. Forget sumptuous and silky, the Nait was hard work with some less forgiving recordings, having a distinctly bright upper midband. This gave it an attractive, upfront directness, but also made early Compact Disc players nigh on unbearable, and wasn't terribly kind with most turntables either. Its supporters said the silky old Linn Sondek turntable – preferably with an Ittok tonearm and Supex SD900 moving coil was a blessing for the Nait, making it a lot easier to listen to. But why would you partner an £800 source with an amplifier costing less than one third of this, replied its critics – and they had a point!

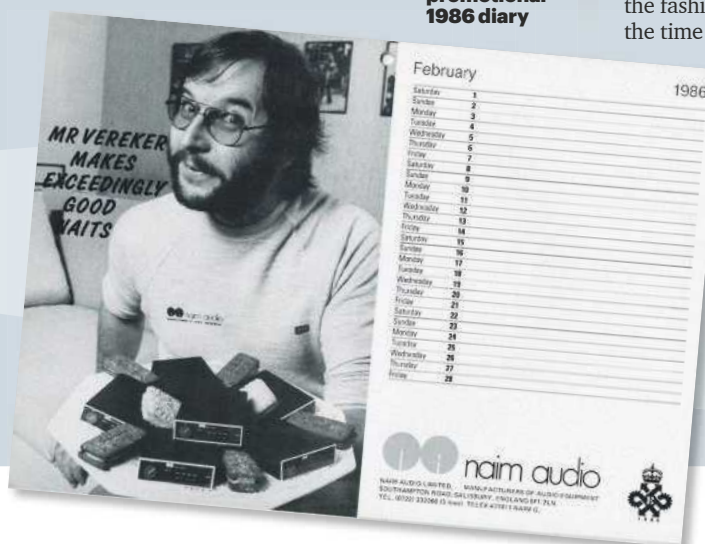
Factor in a rather two-dimensional soundstage and a slightly coarse treble to go with that weak bass and shiny midband, and it was clear the Nait had a lot of 'issues', especially for such an expensive integrated amplifier. Yet just when you began to think it was all a big con, suddenly the sound of the original Nait would

seduce. It was fast, fluid and mightily dynamic for something with such little on-paper power, and had a wonderful talent for presenting music in an important, dramatic way. The baby Naim was truly a funky, feisty affair.

For all its strangeness, the Nait was very well built. The aluminium casework was shared by Naim preamplifiers, which was no bad thing, and the chassis was solid. The single main circuitboard was a quality item, and better laid out than many amplifiers of its day – with much of it taken up by a large custom-made 100VA toroidal power transformer. Also present was an excellent moving magnet phono stage, which was the only part of the preamplifier section to sport RCA phono sockets. It wasn't until fairly recently that the Salisbury company got relaxed about RCAs, and certainly when the early Nait was made they were *non grata*. The remaining tuner line inputs and tape loop were via DIN sockets only; even the loudspeaker outputs were a little different in their day, being banana sockets as opposed to binding posts.

Disappointingly but somewhat inevitably perhaps, the volume control was plastic – straight out of the Tandy catalogue, or so it felt. And you'd be using it all the time, whether it was to turn the unit down to minimise the switch-on thump or to try to coax it round to '11' in a bid to get some more power out! One thing you'd want to be sure of when wringing the bejesus out of the Naim is that you're using the right speaker cables – the amp is very sensitive to these and for best results use Naim NAC 05, or NAC 04 (its cheaper, older and inferior predecessor) if you want to party like it's 1984!

Naim replaced the first Nait at the end of the eighties, and sure enough



**Naim's Julian Vereker in a promotional 1986 diary**

### BUYING SECONDHAND

The great thing about the Naim Nait – and indeed all Naim products – is that the manufacturer still services them. If yours develops a fault, begins to sound a touch lacklustre or just needs a general cosmetic clean up, you can send it back to Salisbury for refurbishment at a surprisingly affordable price. This is one of the reasons why the market for used Naim gear is so high – the excellent aftercare. When buying a used Nait, go for a low owner (preferably one), boxed (not essential, but it tends to indicate the sort of life it's had) example. Ideally it should be excellent cosmetically, too – underlining that it hasn't ended up under umpteen other hi-fi boxes.

The vintage isn't that important – small revisions to the mainboard were made throughout its production life, and the colour of the power LED was changed from red to green. "We just tried to align LED colours for amps and preamps", Naim told us – which flies in the face of the myths of the different coloured LED versions having dramatically different sound quality! Finding out the serial number is helpful too, as a record is kept at the factory of any servicing; you can then see if your prospective unit has been refurbished in any way. Remember that sellers may justifiably be reticent to reveal serial numbers to prospective purchasers, given the strange sorts of things going on in the secondhand market.

the new one had a good deal more power, a proper balance control and the (then) new illuminated Naim logo. It addressed all the weaknesses of the original, and Naim told me it was an obvious sonic improvement – as indeed were all the subsequent Nait (3, 5, 5i, etc) that followed. Still, I do know some Nait aficionados who swear the original was the best – it certainly was the most focused and seemed to distil down 'the Naim sound' better than any that followed, which were far better all-round 'real-world' designs.

### The stuff of legend

Here's one of hi-fi's legendary designs, of which there were a lot in the eighties. It was a crazy decade, and the fashions, music and products of the time reflect this. Few – if any – integrated amplifiers have even been as extreme, offering a wonderfully captivating and musical sound, yet one that's so riddled with compromises. If you like upbeat rock music, don't care too much for the delicate tonality of the instruments and just want to get into the groove, then Naim's original Nait integrated amplifier is still pretty much peerless in its own crazy way ●

# Room for improvement

How much of a difference does where you position your hi-fi make to the characteristics of its sound? After moving house, **David Vivian** has made a timely discovery

**A** long time ago in a bar far, far away, I interviewed loudspeaker designer Robin Marshall. We talked about his work for Monitor Audio and Epos and his then current design ideas for the Infinity brand. I asked him what his all-time favourite speaker was. Perhaps surprisingly, and with no hesitation, he nominated the Spendor BC1. But throughout our chat there was an over-arching rider whenever the subject of how a speaker sounded was broached. The question was essentially unanswerable in anything other than an abstract sense because one crucial variable was missing: the room in which it was played. The prime determinant of the sound – more than the drive units, the crossover (if it had one, his Epos ES11 design famously didn't), the containing enclosure or panel, its coupling to the floor via feet, spikes or a stand – was the room itself. A

## A friend suggested that the house itself might be acting as a giant subwoofer

At the time, I gave the scenario a bit of editorial slack owing to the lateness in the day and the exaggeration that comes with a comfortable sufficiency of red wine. Last week, sober as a judge, I realised there was no exaggeration. Not a speck, not a scintilla. The speakers I thought I knew like the back of my hand suddenly and disconcertingly sounded alien to my ears. In a blind listening test, I'd have been reaching for clichés like chalk and cheese or night and day.

## Changing rooms

As occasionally happens, I hadn't just changed listening room, but listening house. And, with no exaggeration whatsoever, my modest little retro-lite system sounded staggeringly different. Better? I honestly don't know. I'm still trying to work it out. But there's no shortage of clues as to what might have caused the sonic sea change.

My previous listening room was somewhat odd. Originally a 70-year-old loft conversion in an Edwardian terrace, the ceiling and all the walls bar one had been clad with wood panelling, presumably to match the not entirely snug-fitting floorboards. Although roughly 15ft long by 12ft wide, part of the none-too-elevated ceiling was heavily canted on one side by the eve of the roof and, thanks to various indents and incursions, no two walls carried the same dimension. In other words, it was basically asymmetric and so a pretty miserable place

for standing waves to propagate.

As a result, every speaker I had in for review exhibited a wonderfully smooth and even bass with hardly any doubling or cancellation effects. Slightly more perturbing, though great from a pure listening perspective, every speaker also seemed to exhibit significantly greater bass extension than its spec indicated should be the case. Even factoring in the contribution of my dreadnought-class Slate Audio stands for the smaller speakers this was something of a head scratcher until a friend seasoned in the science of room acoustics suggested that, given the slightly gappy floorboards and the alignment of the rooms below over two storeys, the house itself might be acting as a giant subwoofer and giving the falling bottom octave a lift.

How good was that? Well, it was damn great and the envy of pretty much everyone who came to listen. Other aspects of the sound weren't quite so impressive. Because of the low, canted roof imaging suffered. Musicians and instruments never quite snapped into focus and the soundstage lacked height. There was a subtle blurring of detail, too. The room was imposing its character on the system for better and for worse. I guess I adjusted to its idiosyncrasies over the years and began to believe that's how the system sounded.

But of course, as Marshall mooted that day, there is no speaker or system 'sound' out of context. My new listening room, upstairs in a seventies-build detached house, is much more conventional: slightly smaller and almost perfectly L-shaped. It has plasterboard-covered cavity walls, a uniformly high dappled ceiling (ugh), thick carpets and fitted wardrobes. I've got the speakers firing down the longer length like it says in all the best books. Bizarrely, the system is now everything it wasn't in the old room with pinpoint imaging, a warmer, more convincing tonal balance and so much more detail you'd swear the CD player or amp (or both) had been replaced. It sounds more couth, more sophisticated, more 'hi-fi'. That bottom octave has escaped without trace, though, and it's taken some of the excitement with it. I will miss them dearly ●



**Your room can have a huge affect on your system's sound**



**DAVID VIVIAN**  
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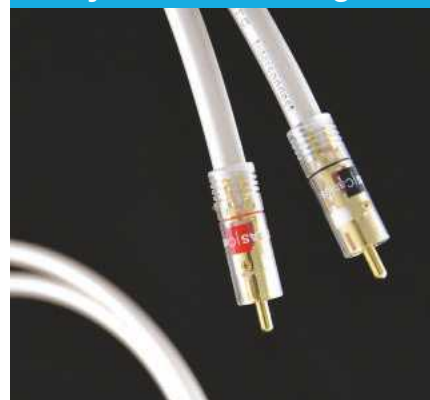
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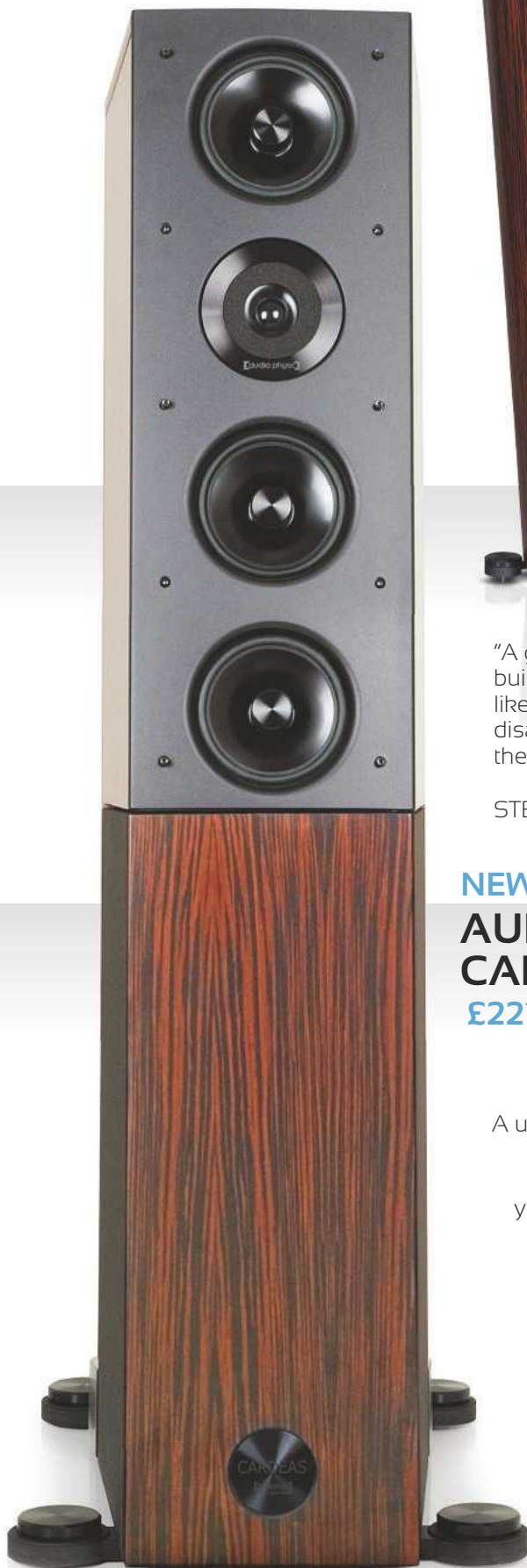
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